

THE HEIRESS OF AYLEWOOD



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BY GERALDINE MOCKLER



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THE HEIRESS OF AYLEWOOD.

Chapter I.

THE LAST DAY OF TERM.

EVERY window in Nevill House, the big, solid-looking, comfortable mansion in FitzJohn's Avenue that was owned by Miss Longman, and was one of the best schools for girls in Hampstead, was lit up, and all the bedrooms were full of laughing, chattering, flurried girls, busily engaged in the absorbing occupation of dressing themselves for the great event of the summer term. For it was the night of the breaking-up party, and all the rules, including the one that prohibited girls from going into one another's rooms, were in abeyance. Eager voices demanding the loan of curlingtongs or hairpins, or requesting to have their frocks fastened, floated down the passage, and girls who were ready ran into the rooms of girls who were not ready, and their well-meant endeavours to help merely added to the general confusion. But fortunately there was plenty of time. As yet it was barely a quarter to eight, and the earliest arrivals would scarcely come until nine.

In marked contrast to the hubbub that prevailed everywhere else on the landing was the peace that reigned within one room at the end of the long passage. It was a fair-sized, comfortably furnished room, containing one bed, and on the foot of that bed sat the owner of the room, Ethel Dunmayne, the most popular, as she was also the prettiest and cleverest, girl in the school. On a low ottoman that was placed beneath the open window, through which the fresh air of a cool July evening was blowing, sat her chief friend, Ida Green.

Both girls were dressed in white evening frocks of some thin, light material, and it was for the sake of enjoying what would probably be their last talk together for many a month to come that they had both arranged to get themselves dressed early, and to spend the half-hour that remained before the party began quietly in Ethel's room. For on the morrow the close intimacy that had existed between them ever since their friendship began would come to an end, neither girl coming back to Nevill House when the September term began.

Their attitudes bespoke a little weariness. Ida rested one elbow on the sill beside her, and her chin was propped against her open palm; while Ethel clasped the bed-rail with her hands, and propped her head upon them.

As the two senior girls in the school, a good deal of the preparation for the evening's festivity had fallen upon them, and they had discharged their duties with the thoroughness that in work and in play characterized them both. They had done the flowers for the supper-table,

superintended the decorations of the schoolroom, seen that the programmes were correctly copied, arranged the seats, and had, in short, made themselves throughout the day as useful as if they had been preparing for an entertainment in their own homes. They were therefore justified in feeling that their short rest was a well-earned one.

Ethel Dunmayne was a very pretty girl, with a clear, pale skin, regular features, and beautiful dark gray eyes, that in moments of excitement looked almost black. Her eyebrows were straight and well marked, and her thick, dark lashes had a pretty upward curl. Her hair was nut-brown, and grew back from her square forehead in a waving manner, that lent itself admirably to the loose way in which she wore it. Ever since Ethel had entered the school, which she had done as a thin, lanky girl of twelve, she had been its acknowledged beauty; and as year by year she had grown even better looking, it was an uncontested fact among the girls that not one of them was fit to hold a candle to her.

Nellie Lomax, with her big blue eyes and flaxen hair, was pretty, while Doris Bedford's raven black locks and brilliant dark eyes, no less than Rhona Burke's merry, dark blue Irish eyes, placed them also in the category of pretty girls; but compared to Ethel—such, at least, was the consensus of opinion at Nevill House—"they were simply nowhere in it."

The friendship that existed between Ida and Ethel was one that, in its early stages at least, had caused a good deal of comment and some heartburning. There were

several girls at Nevill House who felt that they would have made more suitable friends for Ethel than Ida could possibly be. Ida did not care at all for the outdoor games in which Ethel excelled—she did not play hockey or tennis or cricket, neither did she ride or row or swim. Ida Green was a good-looking girl too, although her face might perhaps be more aptly described as piquant and attractive than strictly pretty. Her bright, quick-glancing, blue-gray eyes, a singularly sweet smile, and one of the most musical-speaking voices imaginable, were her chief charms. When she liked she could be excellent company, but her moods were too uncertain for her to be as popular as Ethel was.

She loved books, more especially plays, and it was currently reported of her among her schoolfellows that her memory was so retentive, and her power of detaching her mind from her surroundings so great, that she could at meal times, in class time, when walking with an uncongenial companion—in short, whenever she chose—reproduce whole scenes and acts from any one of Shakespeare's plays, losing herself so entirely in them that she became quite oblivious to her actual surroundings.

Yet in spite of the wonder of their schoolfellows and the disparity of their tastes, Ethel and Ida had been good friends for the whole of the two years during which Ida had been at Nevill House, and both would feel the parting on the morrow.

Yet though Ida had come to Ethel's room for the lengthy chat which they had planned, the silence in the

room had remained unbroken for several minutes, the thoughts of both girls having wandered away from the school life that lay behind them to the new life that would begin for them on the morrow.

Ida's face, on which the evening light fell fully as she turned it towards the sky, wore rather a sad, certainly a sober, expression. Ethel's face, on the contrary, as she gazed past her companion to the trees that grew in the big, shady garden below them, was radiantly happy. It was evident that she was confident that the future held nothing but good in store for her.

"I can hardly believe," she exclaimed, suddenly breaking the silence that had fallen between them, "that to-morrow I shall be a school-girl no longer. It seems almost too good to be true."

"Yet we have had a very nice time here, a very nice time indeed," Ida replied in the musical tones that made everything she said worth listening to, "and I for one am sorry that it is over. But I know that you won't agree with me there."

"Agree with you! Rather not," returned Ethel Dunmayne eagerly. "On the contrary, I am nearly off my head with joy at the idea that this is the last day of my last term, and that to-morrow I am going home for good. Of course I am awfully sorry to leave Miss Longman and the old school, but it is ripping all the same to think that I am not coming back again in seven weeks. I always thought, you know, that I ought to have left last summer; but Uncle Laurence insisted on my staying until I was

eighteen, and so, of course, there was nothing more to be said."

"But I expect you said a good deal, nevertheless," observed Ida, with a quiet smile breaking up the gravity of her face.

"Well, yes, I believe I did. But it was not of much use. Uncle Laurence can be firm when he likes, and he was firm then. So back I came, and on the whole I am not sorry now. After all, the three extra terms have passed awfully quick, and if I had left a year ago I should not at this present moment be enjoying the delightful feeling that I am leaving now. I should have got accustomed to my freedom by this time, and not be reveling in the thought of it as I am to-night."

"Freedom," echoed Ida. "I don't think you need complain that you have not had that here, Ethel. You were emancipated from real school routine a year ago."

"Yes, the advantages of being a parlour boarder are many," returned Ethel. "This nice bedroom to myself was one of them. But then, of course, when one is eighteen one cannot be treated quite as an ordinary school-girl."

"Not when one is the heiress of Aylewood Manor and the niece of an indulgent uncle, at any rate," returned Ida. "Now I, though several months older than you, Ethel, have not had any of those special privileges in which you have revelled—not on my own account, that is to say, though, thanks to you, Ethel, I have enjoyed more treats in a year than will probably come my way during the rest

of my life. But for you I should never have seen Irving in *Faust*, or heard Melba, or seen *Hamlet*, or gone to any of the pastoral plays, or—”

“Please don’t thank me,” broke in Ethel; “you know, or you ought to know, that it made it ever so much nicer for me having somebody to enjoy things with. And considering that Fräulein invariably slept through the greater part of every entertainment to which she chaperoned me, and that Mademoiselle was always looking at her watch, they could not be said to appreciate them much. So it was just selfishness that made me write to Uncle Laurence and ask him if Miss Longman might not take three tickets instead of two for everything I wanted to see.”

“Sir Laurence must be very rich,” said Ida thoughtfully, as she recalled the comfortable, not to say luxurious, way in which they had seen all the various sights which Ethel had not given her time to enumerate.

When Ethel acquiesced in her uncle’s decision that she should remain at school a year longer than she had ever contemplated doing, she had stipulated that she should be allowed to visit theatres, concerts, picture galleries, exhibitions, and museums, and Sir Laurence had given a very willing consent, provided, of course, that the expeditions were made under proper escort. His Devonshire home was in a remote and rather lonely spot, and he thought that it would be a great advantage to Ethel to have received the wider education that her plan would effect before she left school. Miss Longman, who was one

of the most delightful of schoolmistresses, and a kindly, sensible, clever woman into the bargain, approved most heartily of the suggestion, but she wisely limited the outings to two a week; which indeed, if Ethel was to profit by the history and literature lectures, and by her studies in French and German, which were about all of the school curriculum which she still attended, was as much as she could manage with any benefit to herself.

Miss Longman occasionally accompanied her pupil herself, but it was not often that she could spare the time, and Ethel had perforce to content herself with the society of Fräulein, or Mademoiselle, or Miss Martin, the English governess, none of whom she found specially interesting as companions; and it was not until the wistful expression that she one day surprised in Ida's eyes, as she listened to an account of a Shakespearian play at Her Majesty's, told her how much Ida would enjoy the expeditions that Ethel took steps to secure her friend's company in future. Ida's delight more than rewarded her for the little act of thoughtfulness; and Miss Longman was very glad that Ida, whose future lines were not laid in the pleasant places through which Ethel's would run, should have the opportunity not only of enjoying herself, but of improving her mind and enlarging her ideas at the same time.

"Yes, Uncle Laurie is rich," said Ethel in answer to Ida's last remark; "but then, you know, I am rich too, or shall be when I am twenty-one. I suppose I shall have about three or four thousand a year, and a lovely old house in Sussex. I can just remember it, although I

only saw it for one day when I was ten years old. For some things I wish we were going to live there now, although dear old Nutcombe must always seem more like home than Aylewood can ever be. Still, Aylewood is a different sort of place altogether."

"And, in short, you would like to begin to be mistress of Aylewood, and the Lady of the Manor at once," Ida broke in with a merry laugh that robbed the words of any sting they might have contained. In fact, they were merely an allusion to an old joke against Ethel, which Ida would never have known had Ethel not told her about it. "I wonder if your cousins would dislike you now if they saw you. I don't think they would if they knew you," she added, with an affectionate outspokenness that was as far as possible removed from mere flattery.

"They certainly disliked me most cordially that day," Ethel said, and as she spoke such a vivid remembrance of that far-away incident of her childhood came back to her mind that she could not resist speaking of it again. "It was about six months after my father's death, which had left me, as his only child, the heiress of this Aylewood property, to which he had not long succeeded himself, when Uncle Laurence, who had to go down to Aylewood on some business connected with the letting of the place, took me there with him. I was a horrible, self-willed little monkey, I believe, with a big sense of my own importance. That was more my nurse's fault than my own. She was a dear old woman, and devoted to me, but she had heard about the money and the place that

would be mine when I grew up, and she was fond of telling people in my hearing that I was the heiress of Aylewood, and by doing all she could to make me think that I was a person of no small consequence was doing her best to make me odiously conceited and boastful. So when I heard that I was going down to Aylewood I was very much delighted.

“‘That’s the place that I am heiress of, isn’t it, Uncle Laurence?’ I asked as Uncle Laurence and I travelled down from London.

“Whenever Uncle Laurence is a little annoyed or surprised he is quite silent for a minute. He was silent then for a moment. Then he said rather gravely, ‘Yes, my dear.’

“I remember I was not a little disappointed not to find a grand carriage and crowds of cheering villagers, who would want to take out the horses and drag us up to the house, waiting at the station. That would have seemed a fitting way of welcoming the heiress of Aylewood. But Uncle Laurence did not look as if he had expected a carriage or a cheering crowd; he just stepped into a dusty fly, and we drove for about two miles along country roads until we came to a little village. In the middle of the High Street the cab stopped before a square, red-brick house, the door of which opened on to the pavement.

“‘Is this Aylewood, Uncle Laurence?’ I asked as I scrambled out of the fly after him.

“He nodded, and then the door opened, and we went into the house. We were shown into a big room, where a lady and a gentleman were sitting. As I learnt after-

wards, they were cousins of mine, but, much to my annoyance, they took very little notice indeed of me.

“‘This is my niece Ethel,’ Uncle Laurence said, ‘poor Robert’s only daughter. I had to come down to-day on business, and I thought I would bring her with me to make the acquaintance of her cousins.’

“Well, nobody seemed to wish to profit by the opportunity that was offered to them,” Ethel continued with a laugh. “Cousin Alice shook hands with me, but Cousin Edmund did not even do that.

“‘So that is Robert’s daughter and heiress,’ he said, just glancing at me.

“At the word ‘heiress’ I must have pricked up my ears.

“‘Yes, I am the heiress of Aylewood,’ I said in an important tone, hoping, no doubt, to make an impression. And I think there is no doubt that I did. Cousin Edmund burst into rather a loud sort of laugh, and Cousin Alice looked at him in a frightened manner.

“‘You have lost no time in impressing that fact upon her mind, Laurence,’ he said. ‘Send her out into the garden; she will find the children there, and I want to have a talk with you.’

“So one of my younger cousins was sent for, and I was led into the large garden that lay at the back of the house, where a boy of about fourteen, another girl, and a little boy were sitting and lying about under a tree. The bigger boy, I remember, was reading, and did not look as if he liked being disturbed.

“‘This is our cousin, Ethel Dunmayne, Hugh,’ said the

girl who had fetched me from the drawing-room, and whose name, as far as I can remember, was Joan.

“‘Oh,’ said Hugh. Then he jumped up, shook hands with me in a very grave, deliberate manner, and asked me to sit down.

“‘I won’t shake hands with the nasty thing!’ burst out the other little girl quite suddenly. She was about eleven, and had long black hair hanging down her back, and elfin-looking dark eyes.

“‘And I hate you,’ I retorted very readily, for by that time I was thoroughly sulky and cross. It did not seem to me that I had been treated with sufficient respect, and the steady, grave way in which Hugh stared at me, as if he were mentally summing me up, had not improved my temper.

“‘Shut up, Margaret,’ said Hugh; ‘you need not shake hands with her unless you like, but you mustn’t be rude. She is our visitor, remember.’

“‘But she ought to shake hands with me,’ I persisted. ‘She doesn’t know who I am. I am the heiress of Aylewood, and I am not a visitor. This is my house and garden, and if I chose I could send you all away from it, and never let you come into it again.’

“At that Margaret screwed up her features, and made the most awful face at me. Joan muttered something I did not hear, but which was probably not at all complimentary to me; and Hugh told me in most decided language that neither the house nor the garden belonged to me, and that he would be obliged if I would kindly behave myself while I was with them.

“‘You are telling lies,’ I said promptly. ‘This is Aylewood—Uncle Laurence said so—and nurse has told me ever so many times that Aylewood belongs to me.’

“At that Hugh marched up to me and took me by the shoulders. I thought that he was going to hit me, or shake me at the very least; but though he was ever so much bigger and stronger than I was, I was not in the least afraid.

“‘You had better not say that again,’ he said. ‘I do not allow any one, even a little girl like you, to say that I tell lies.’

“I tried to wriggle out of his grasp, but could not. So I stamped my foot, and said, ‘Liar, liar, liar!’ three times as distinctly as the temper I was in would allow me.

“He marched me up to the mulberry tree, and put my hands behind my back. ‘Stay there with your face to the tree until I give you leave to move,’ he said.

“And do you know, Ida,” Ethel continued, laughing a little at the recollection of the childish scene, “the curious thing was that I did as he told me, and stayed there with my face to the tree-trunk and my hands behind my back. He made Margaret go to another tree as a punishment for being rude to a visitor, and then he and Joan sat as gravely as two judges on the grass.

“Presently Uncle Laurence came across the lawn, and saw the poor heiress of Aylewood in that humiliating position.

“‘Dear, dear,’ he said as I rushed towards him, ‘and I had hoped that all you children would be friends.’

“‘Ethel has been dreadfully rude, Uncle Laurence,’

Joan was beginning, when Hugh, who certainly managed to keep his sisters in better order than I have ever seen a brother succeed in keeping his sisters since, cut her short by forbidding her to tell tales.

“But Uncle Laurence got to the root of the matter somehow, and did his best to make peace between us all by explaining the mistake I had made in supposing that the village of Aylewood and Aylewood Manor were one and the same thing. He then reproved me for my silliness in boasting about the fact that I was an heiress.

“‘Well-bred people do not brag about the things that belong to them,’ he said, ‘or about the things that they can do. It is only ill-mannered people who do that. Supposing your cousin Hugh was to boast about the very brave deed he performed last month in saving a little boy from drowning, and for which he is to receive a medal from the Royal Humane Society, you would not think it very modest of him, would you? And yet his act is something to be far prouder of than if he owned all the lands of Aylewood.’

“I remember Hugh grew furiously red at this praise, but he looked very pleased all the same; and then he and Uncle Laurence began to talk of other things, about fishing and shooting, and seemed to forget me altogether—in fact, I was made to feel pretty small all round that day, and it did me good, for I never again bragged about being the heiress of Aylewood. I drove through the park to the house with Uncle Laurence afterwards, but I don’t recollect much about it, and the quarrel with my cousins

is the only part of that day that I can remember at all distinctly. I would not shake hands with any one of them before I left, though I am glad to think that I told Hugh I was sorry for having called him a liar. And indeed to this day, when I think of the anger that blazed in his blue eyes, I wonder I had the courage to do so. But he had roused my temper by doubting my word, and that is a thing which to this day makes me terribly angry."

"And you have never seen any of them since?" asked Ida.

"No; and I haven't the least wish to do so. I shall see quite enough of them, I expect, when I go to Aylewood to live. I have forgiven them for it, of course, but I can't quite forget, child though I was at the time, the very unfriendly way in which they received me. Looking back upon it now, it seems as if they must have actually disliked me."

"It does rather," admitted Ida. "Perhaps they had quarrelled with your father, or perhaps they thought that they, and not you, should have inherited Aylewood."

"Hardly that, I think," replied Ethel. "As my father's daughter, I have a better right to it than they could possibly have. Why, they are not even my first cousins! No, they have some other reason for not wanting to have anything to do with me. Whatever it is, it really does not much matter to me; it is not likely that we shall ever have much to do with one another. So, on the whole, I am perfectly content to be going to Nutcombe and not to Aylewood."

"And well may you be content, I think," said Ida, who had once spent part of the holidays with her friend at Nutcombe, and had fallen in love with the beautiful little spot. "I cannot imagine a more delightful place to live in. Why, with your outdoor tastes, Ethel, you will have just an ideal existence there!"

"I think I shall," said Ethel, her eyes lightening in anticipation. "I shall get no end of boating and bathing; and I shall probably join as many tennis, and golf, and hockey, and badminton clubs as Torleigh and Baxter can produce between them. But the hunting is what I am looking forward to most of all. There are three packs of hounds within easy reach of Nutcombe, and I mean to get uncle to buy me three really good hunters, besides a hack or so, and go in seriously for hunting. Then, now that I have come out properly, I expect uncle will entertain a good deal; and he wants me to understand something about housekeeping, and act the part of mistress of the house, you know. So you see I shan't be altogether idle. But here am I talking away about myself as usual, and not letting you get in a word about yourself."

"But I don't want to talk about myself," protested Ida with a laugh. "I am only too conscious that, compared with yourself, for instance, I am a very uninteresting person, and that my future will be a very humdrum one."

"You must come and stay with me a great deal," Ethel began eagerly. "Uncle Laurence has often told me that I can ask friends to stay with me as often and for as long as I like. And you know he took a great fancy to you,

Ida. I had hardly realized that you could talk so well about all the things we had seen together until I heard you discussing plays and pictures with him. Why, I really believe that I got to know more of you during that month than I had ever found out before. Uncle Laurence told me that he thought I was very lucky in having you for a friend."

"You should have told him that there was hardly a girl in the school who did not envy me my luck in being your friend," said Ida, "and then he would have known that it was I, and not you, who was to be congratulated."

Ethel laughed, but let the statement pass unchallenged. She was so well used to her popularity by that time that she took it very much as a matter of course. Handsome, clever, generous, good-humoured, good at games, she was just the kind of girl that her school companions would idolize. Straight as a die herself, and uncompromisingly honest both in word and deed, she had an unbounded scorn for any one who tampered with the truth; and to encounter a contemptuous glance in Ethel Dunmayne's clear gray eyes, or to see her lip curl disdainfully, was a severer punishment to many a nervous girl detected in falsehood than any that could be meted out by the school authorities. But admired and adored as she was by all her school companions, there were few, if any, who would have dreamed of coming to her for consolation in any pain or trouble. Congratulations were another matter. Praise from Ethel Dunmayne was valued highly at Nevill House, and any girl who earned it thought all the better

of herself in consequence. She was not without sympathy too, for the defeated who had made a good fight; it was for the dull, or the stupid, or the incompetent that Ethel felt an almost unconscious impatience, which made the objects of it shrink from her pitiless glance.

"Well, but to go back to what I was saying when you interrupted me." Ida smiled quietly to herself. It was not any interruption on her part, but the sudden tangent at which Ethel had gone off that had broken the thread of their conversation. "You must come and stay with me, Ida. When will you come? Let us settle the date now."

"I am afraid I cannot fix any time," said Ida, shaking her head. "It is quite out of the question for me to think of gadding about the country paying visits. I am going home to settle down to real hard work, you know, Ethel."

"Yes, I know that. But I did not know that you were going to be so busy that you could not come to me whenever you chose," said Ethel disconsolately. "You simply must come, Ida. That is the long and the short of it. I shall get Uncle Laurence to write and ask you, and then you will not be able to refuse."

"Oh, won't I though," said Ida, laughing. "Seriously, Ethel, it wouldn't do for me to think of going away directly I got home. It has been as much as ever father could afford keeping me here as long as he has, and now, of course, he expects some return. So I am to have the sole charge of Ruth and Tom, besides the housekeeping

and any amount of work in the parish. So you see once I take up my duties it won't be easy to lay them down again."

"Nonsense," said Ethel. "What about that Miss Fletcher who has been teaching your little brother and sister since you came away? Couldn't you get her to help you with them again?"

"Miss Fletcher has been more than kind," said Ida; "had it not been for her I could hardly have remained here so long. But I cannot expect her to continue to devote herself for ever to the children. She does a tremendous lot in the parish, too, and is father's right hand. I am afraid he will be very much disappointed if he expects me to be as useful to him as she is. I don't seem to have the knack of talking to poor people. It's not that I am not sorry for them. Sometimes I feel the hopeless misery of their lives so acutely that I can hardly help breaking down before them and crying; and that, you know, Ethel, considering that I have gone with the intention of cheering them up, is not exactly what is wanted."

"I suppose not," said Ethel rather absently. "But it would be hardly fair if your father expected you to be as clever at parish work as Miss Fletcher—at any rate at first. I suppose she is quite old, and has had years of practice."

"Miss Fletcher old! Not a bit of it. I don't think she is more than thirty-five. She lives in rooms not far from us, and has some hundreds a year of her own. I used to wonder why she lived in such a dingy, dreary

place as the poor part of Liverpool is, but I have found out since that her chief pleasure in life is doing good to others, and not only to poor people. It was she who discovered how much I would give to go to school for a couple of years, and who advised father to send me here. You see, at home there was never any time for me to read or study, and I felt rather as if I were doing wrong whenever I opened a book. Here, of course, it is just the other way, for it was my duty to work as hard as I could, and a very delightful duty I found it. But now all that is over, and I must go back and teach the children, and visit in the parish."

"If you didn't like it before, you will like it still less now," observed Ethel, catching the sigh to which Ida gave utterance in spite of her resolute endeavour to stifle it.

"Oh no, I won't," said Ida. "I don't mean to wear a martyr-like expression at home, and make father sorry he ever sent me away. I shall always remember how kind it was of him to spare me for these two years, and do my very best never to let him see that an unending round of parish work is not what I like best in the world."

"Does he know what you would like best? About going on the stage, I mean."

Ida shook her head. "No; I should not dare to tell him," she said. "I should be so afraid that he might think I only wanted to be an actress because I was dissatisfied at home, and I could not bear him to think that."

"But he doesn't disapprove of the stage, does he?" asked Ethel.

"Oh no. An old college friend of his is the actor manager of a very good touring company called the Cavendish Comedy Company, which visits all the big towns in the north, and goes over to Dublin, and Edinburgh too. And this Mr. Rawlinson always comes to see father when the company is in Liverpool, and gives us all passes for the theatre. Father has taken me ever so many times, and has always thoroughly enjoyed himself. I remember once, when I was quite a little girl, Mr. Rawlinson asked me if I would like to go on the stage. Even then it was my secret ambition, and he laughed when he read the answer in my eager face, and asked father if he would have any objection to my choosing the stage as a career. 'Not if she showed real aptitude for it,' father answered, 'and if she could be spared from home.' Two very big 'ifs,' you see," concluded Ida with a sigh, which this time she did not attempt to suppress.

"There is no 'if' as far as the aptitude is concerned," put in Ethel, "and you know it, Ida. You have a real talent for acting, and if you don't go on the stage you will miss your proper vocation. There is hardly any actress we have seen that you couldn't beat in time."

"Oh, oh!" put in Ida. "Draw it mild, Ethel."

"I said in time, mind you," repeated Ethel, refusing to budge from the assertion she had made. "I only wish we were going to have some theatricals to-night

instead of a concert. I should have liked to see you act once more, Ida. Now, I suppose, I shall have to wait until I see you on a real stage."

"Then I am afraid you will have to wait a very long time," returned Ida. "The only part I am going to act for many years to come is that of nursery governess to two small, unruly children, and I shall do my very best to make the rôle a success."

While this conversation was proceeding in Ethel's room the talk and laughter and the scurrying of the feet in the passage outside had increased rather than lessened, and during the last few minutes one voice had been raised in coaxing, cajoling accents above all the others.

"Ah, you might! It's not a moment that it would take you. There is not a girl in the school that can do my hair in the elegant way that you can, Mary Leigh. Come now, here's a chair and here's myself. You won't? Bad luck to you, then, for the unkind creature that you are! I shall go and ask Ida Green. She's not one to turn her back upon a body in distress."

Ida and Ethel exchanged a glance half of amusement, half of vexation that their privacy was about to be interrupted. Rhona Burke was one of the most teasing, talkative school-girls imaginable, and both Ethel and Ida knew that once she got into the room they would scarcely succeed in turning her out until it was time to go downstairs.

"Ida won't do your hair for you," cried several voices together. "She's not in her room, she's in Ethel's; and they won't thank you for disturbing them."

"And that's all you know about it," returned Rhona as her steps approached the door. "Ethel is not the girl to refuse admittance when it is strictly on business. Besides, she knows it's the last she'll see of Rhona Burke for many a day to come, and her kind heart will make her want to please me all she knows."

The last words were spoken almost through the key-hole, and the barefaced flattery earned her a laughing permission to enter. And with a cloud of short curling hair hanging over her shoulders, and clad in a long dressing-gown, Rhona whisked into the room, and promptly shutting the door again upon the half-dozen or so girls who would have liked to have made their way in after her, she turned a laughing, triumphant face to the two older girls.

"It's fine to be you with a room of your own," she said as she sank down on a chair. "The babel those girls make out there is simply appalling."

"It seems to have got quieter since you came in here," remarked Ethel.

"Does it now?" said Rhona innocently. "I wonder how that can be. But it wasn't for the sake of indulging in repartee that I stormed the fortress; it was to get Ida to do my hair. There's no one like you, Ida, for getting my hair to look tidy, without at the same time making me look like a Sunday-school child out for a treat."

"What about Mary Leigh?" inquired Ida, rising from the ottoman, and setting to work with brush and comb on the curly tangle that covered Rhona's head.

"Oh, Mary Leigh is to you, my dear Ida, what a good, plain cook is to a Parisian chef," returned Rhona unabashed.

"I rather think I heard you use that simile last Sunday," observed Ida; "only then I was the good, plain cook."

"That's because I didn't know better then," said Rhona calmly. "But it's you that knows how to make me look altogether charming, Ida, and I want to look my best to-night. Patrick is bringing a friend to the concert, and I don't want them to think that I am the worst-looking girl in the school. Ah, oh! how you pull, Ida!"

"They would certainly have thought that you had the untidiest head of hair of any girl in the school," returned Ida with severity, as she vainly tried to pass the comb through it.

"Dad always says that the garden rake is the proper implement to use on my hair," said Rhona. "I've half a mind to borrow his razors when I get home, and make a clean shave of the whole wig; it would be so jolly cool and pleasant in this weather. Hullo, Ethel! there's a knock at the door. Misfortunes never come singly, do they? Inspired by the success with which I have met, some one else has resolved to try their luck."

"Come in," cried Ethel; and in response to her invitation the door opened, and a small girl with shining curls, and looking very smart in a thin, white silk dress and white shoes and stockings, ran into the room. This was little Helen Longman, Miss Longman's orphan niece, and the youngest girl in the whole school.

Though Ethel did not take nearly as much notice of the child as many of the other girls, Helen adored Ethel, and was never happier than when she was sitting on her knee with an arm, no matter how warm the weather, wound tightly round her neck.

"Auntie has sent me up with this letter for you, Ethel," the child cried, running across the room to the bed where Ethel still sat, watching in rather an absent manner Ida's struggles to reduce Rhona's hair to proper order.

"A letter! Oh, thank you," Ethel said, stretching out her hand for it. "And from Uncle Laurence," she added, as her eyes fell upon the writing.

"Auntie said that I was to tell you that it is half-past eight, and that she hopes you will all be downstairs by a quarter to nine. That," with the air of one who imparts a valuable bit of information, "will be in a quarter of an hour. Rhona doesn't look as though she would be ready," the child added as she went towards the door, too full of excitement at the thought of the approaching party to wish to linger even in Ethel's room.

"Oh yes, Rhona will be ready," cried the Irish girl. "Shut the door, like a good child. If I sit in a draught my beautiful tidy hair will be blown into my eyes again. It isn't for a humble mortal like myself to offer advice to so great a personage as Miss Ethel Dunmayne," the lively girl rattled on, "but wouldn't it be wiser on her part if she turned on the light, and didn't try to ruin her eyes by reading in the dark?"

"Well, yes, it would. Uncle Laurence's handwriting

isn't easy to read even in the best of light," Ethel answered. "I have only been able to make out one sentence so far. He begins by saying that he has a splendid piece of news for me," she added, turning to Ida; "but I don't expect it will prove news to me. I feel pretty sure that he goes on to say that he has already bought one, or perhaps all three, of those hunters that I want this winter."

She rose as she spoke, and switching on the electric light, sat down by the dressing-table to continue the reading of the letter. Ida, glancing at her friend, saw the pleased look of excited expectancy that her face had worn give way to a rather blank expression, that presently altered again to a puzzled frown.

"Three horses of your very own!" exclaimed Rhona. "Oh, you lucky girl, Ethel! It's only a fifth share in a pony that has seen its best days that I get at home. You may read the letter aloud if you like, Ethel; I should like to hear about those horses."

But to that gracious permission Ethel made no response; and it was not until Rhona, with her frizzy hair as nearly approaching order as it ever reached, and neatly tied at the nape of her neck with a cream ribbon, had, after profuse thanks to Ida, and a gay promise to introduce her not only to her brother, but to her brother's friend as well, taken herself out of the room that Ethel opened her lips.

"It's a most astonishing piece of news that Uncle Laurence has given me," she said then, looking up from



"Auntie has sent me up with this letter for you, Ethel."

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her letter. "As you know, Ida, Uncle Laurence is as bad a correspondent as I am. We only write to each other about once a fortnight at the most. Well, in this letter he tells me that a step-sister of his, a Mrs. Nugent, and her daughter Violet have come to live at Nutcombe—for good, mind you, Ida," Ethel added. "They have been there about a week, and already," glancing again at the letter, "feel very much at home there. But I will read you the letter from the beginning if you care to listen to it. We have time, I think; it is only five-and-twenty minutes to nine now, and the letter is not very long."

And taking, as she was right in doing, Ida's willingness to listen for granted, Ethel began to read:—

"NUTCOMBE HALL, TORLEIGH.

"MY DEAREST ETHEL,—Just a line to give you a splendid piece of news, which I know you will be very greatly delighted to hear. As I shall see you to-morrow, it is not worth while to write at any great length; but, on the other hand, it might not do if I took you altogether by surprise. For surprised you would be if you arrived to-morrow and found two strangers—strangers to you, at least—settled in the house without a word from me to prepare you for the fact, or to tell you who they were.

"You may have heard me speak of my step-sister Isabel; but, on the other hand, it is more than probable that you have no recollection of my having done so, for, truth to say, we were separated so very early in life that I think we must have almost forgotten each other's

existence. I went out to India while she was still a mere child in the nursery, and when I came back she had gone out to an aunt in Canada, where she subsequently married and settled. For many years she was in exceedingly prosperous circumstances, and I had never supposed for a moment that those circumstances had undergone an alteration. You may judge, therefore, of my surprise and distress when I learnt the other day from her that her husband had been dead for nearly four years, and that she and her children had been left very badly off. The boy is now in his uncle's office in London, but Isabel and Violet, who is about seventeen, are going to take up their quarters with us, I hope permanently. I can well imagine how delighted you will be"—Ida's attentive eyes were on her friend's face, but she read no joy there—"and it is for your sake that I am mainly pleased at the arrangement. A companion of your own age living in the house is exactly what you have always wanted, and I feel sure that you and Violet will be great friends. She is looking forward impatiently to making your acquaintance to-morrow, and has done little but ask me questions about you all day. Though they have been here only a few days they already feel quite at home. But I will write no more now.—With much love, your affectionate uncle,

LAURENCE DUNMAYNE."

The abruptness with which the letter ended left Ida unprepared for a moment with any comment. She did not honestly think that her friend was by any means

to be congratulated on the news. The advent of a strange step-aunt and step-cousin into a house of which she had naturally looked forward to being the sole mistress was bound to bring a good deal of alteration with it, and though they might all get on very well together, on the other hand they might do nothing of the sort.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Ethel, as she slowly folded her uncle's letter and slipped it into its envelope again. "But you need not tell me that you are not sure that it will prove such a splendid arrangement for me as Uncle Laurence is certain it will. Your face tells me that."

"Well, I do think that it is rather a startling piece of news," admitted Ida. "Of course everything depends upon what they are like. If they are nice, it will be very nice—"

"And if they are nasty, it will be very nasty," supplemented Ethel. "Thank you for nothing, Ida."

Ida laughed. "I don't think I was going to say anything quite as silly as that," she remonstrated; "but in a case like this it is rather difficult to know what to say. We are really quite in the dark, you see. Have you no idea at all what your aunt and cousin are like? But Sir Laurence says you are sure to like them, and that shows that they must be nice, doesn't it?"

"Not a bit of it," declared Ethel. "They might be simply horrid, and Uncle Laurence would not know it. He always takes it for granted that everybody is as good and noble as he is himself, so that proves nothing,

I am afraid. He really does not know much more about his step-sister and his niece than I do. His mother married again when Uncle Laurence and my father were boys of fifteen and sixteen, and Aunt Isabel was the only child of her second marriage. Both her parents died when she was about eighteen, and she went out to Canada, to a sister of her father's, and married there, and has lived there ever since. She and Uncle Laurence haven't written to each other, or even heard of each other, for years. I remember his telling me so one day, so it seems very odd to think that now she and her daughter are coming to live with us altogether. But, however, there they are, and doubtless, horrid or nice, there they will remain."

"You take it very coolly," said Ida. "I don't think I should be quite so calm if I had just heard that a strange aunt and cousin were coming to live with me. But, of course, if the girl is nice it will be rather jolly for you to have some one of your own age in the house."

"Oh yes, if she is a good sort we shall get on all right; and if she is not, well, after all, it won't much matter. The house is big enough to hold us both without any fear of our quarrelling."

The first surprise occasioned by the news over, Ethel did not allow it to disturb her. No petty feeling of jealousy or soreness that she would not now take her place as mistress of her uncle's house as much as entered her mind, far less took root there. Not only was she

sensible enough to recognize that Sir Laurence Dunmayne had a perfect right to invite whom he pleased to live with him, but she was perfectly ready to acquiesce in any arrangement of the sort he might make. He had been totally wrong in supposing that she wanted a companion of her own age; but as one had been provided for her, nothing was further from Ethel's thoughts than any idea of quarrelling with her.

"But supposing she does not like you," said Ida, "and supposing she is a disagreeable sort of girl, who will try to supplant you in your uncle's affections, and be so horrid generally that she will quite spoil your home, what will you do then?"

"You are determined to prepare me for the very worst," said Ethel, breaking out into a laugh. "Well, if she drives me from Nutcombe, there remains Aylewood for me to take refuge in. Perhaps my tenants would kindly let me live in a corner of it, or in one of the lodges, until I came of age. But what nonsense we are talking. Violet is sure to like me, and to want to become great friends with me. Didn't you tell me not a quarter of an hour ago that no one could help liking me, and are you so soon going to withdraw your words?" •

As a matter of fact, Ethel did not think it worth while to take into serious consideration the chance that her cousin might not like her. She was so much accustomed to the popularity in which she was held by her school-fellows, that she took it very much as a matter of course that she should be a favourite wherever she went.

"I must say that I like looking all round a thing," observed Ida thoughtfully, "and then you know all about it that there is to be known."

"And I like looking on the bright side only," said Ethel; "and if a thing hasn't got a bright side, then it isn't worth looking at at all."

"Nonsense again," said Ida, her eyes resting with a grave, thoughtful expression in them on the gay, smiling ones of her companion. "Some things that have not got a bit of brightness in them have to be faced."

"Yes, I know," said Ethel; "but the point is, that I have never had to face them. And really, I don't know why I ever should. If Miss Violet turns out to be the unpleasant young person that you have pictured her, well, it really won't hurt me much. She can go her own way, and be as disagreeable as she pleases, and I can go my own nice way, and our respective paths will never cross. But I say," she broke off suddenly, jumping to her feet, "look at the time, Ida. It only wants two minutes to the quarter, and it will never do for you and me to be late. We must make a rush for it to the drawing-room." And catching up her long trailing skirt, Ethel hurried from the room, and could be heard speeding with light feet down the passage.

Ida lingered a moment, her glance wandering round the room as if she were mentally bidding good-bye, as indeed she was, to a place of which she had grown very fond. Many and many a pleasant half-hour had she and Ethel passed together in the cosy, pretty room; but now they

were all over, and on the morrow she and her friend would be schoolfellows no longer.

All the girls, to the number of some five-and-thirty, were in the drawing-room when Ethel, with Ida some few paces only behind her, entered, and her appearance, accustomed though her schoolfellows were to her striking looks, was greeted with a little buzz of admiration. Taken as a whole, the girls at Nevill House were a very pretty set that term, and dressed all in white, with their hair done in the manner that was most suited to each individual face, they looked their best that evening. Yet there was not one girl that could be compared to Ethel for a moment. Just as she came out first in every school examination for which she had entered, so did she bear away the palm of good looks among her fellows. More than once Miss Longman had humorously remarked to her junior partner, Miss Alison, that the indefinable air of distinction that had been Ethel's from the time she was a little girl really shed a lustre upon the whole school, and made ample amends for the plebeian appearance of the three Misses Robinson, the rich city magnate's daughters.

Fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, and cousins had been invited to the breaking-up party, and once the guests had begun to arrive the room filled rapidly, and the girls were soon busily engaged in greeting their friends and relations, and carrying them cups of tea and coffee. Rhona, mindful of her promise to Ida, seized an early opportunity of introducing both her brother and his friend to her.

Patrick Burke was a merry, impudent-looking boy of sixteen, with a brogue as rich as his sister's, whom he audibly congratulated upon the unusual neatness of her appearance, to the consternation of his friend, who, though a couple of years older than Patrick, lacked the latter's easy assurance.

"You can't think what a bother he made about coming," pursued Patrick; "I had almost to drag him here by main force. He declared that he'd sooner be mixed up in a street riot than face a girls' school; but I promised to take care of him, and here we are, you see."

"I say, shut up, Burke," whispered young Hammond, with an agonized expression of countenance. "Your voice carries as far as the drill sergeant's, and you are talking so loud that everybody in the room will know that I didn't want to come."

"Your face tells them that, old man," chuckled Patrick.—"Hullo, Rhona!" he added, turning excitedly to his sister as Ethel came across the room to speak to Ida, "you can introduce us to that girl too, if you like; she looks awfully jolly."

The shy Hammond made a movement as if he would escape, but hemmed in as he was on both sides by girls, escape was out of the question, and he was forced to undergo yet another introduction.

"I didn't particularly want to introduce either of you to Ethel," Rhona said, with a frankness that matched her brother's, "for there was a want of cordiality in the permission she gave me to come into her room just

now that pained me, and I thought she didn't deserve this treat."

"Oh, you are making it a favour, then, to introduce us to your friends, are you?" said Patrick in a highly-diverted tone.

Hammond and Ethel laughed too, and the time having come for an adjournment to the concert room, he found himself walking down the long passage at Ethel's side; and under the influence of her perfectly natural manner his shyness rapidly disappeared, so that when, under cover of the slight confusion that ensued as they looked for seats, Patrick whispered to him that if he liked to make himself scarce he, Patrick, was willing to take his place and do the polite to Ethel, Hammond emphatically declined the kindly disinterested offer. By dint of a little manœuvring, however, Patrick secured a place on her other hand, and the two boys passed such a delightful evening that both of them were quite sorry when it was over. But Ethel was not with them all the time. Though she was taking no part in the programme that had been arranged for the evening, not being either musical or having any talent for recitation, she had promised to turn over the pages of their music for some of the performers, and in fulfilment of that promise she was obliged to appear many times on the platform, where, though she was wholly unconscious of the fact, she attracted a good deal more attention than was paid to the generally nervous young performer.

There was scarcely a person present who did not ask

the name of the pretty, rather imperious-looking girl, and many were the envious glances cast by the brothers of other girls at Patrick Burke and young Hammond. Ethel accepted the open admiration of the two boys in exactly the same way as she had always taken the admiration of her schoolfellows, and that was entirely as a matter of course; and instead of being in the least impressed or flattered by the attention she received, there was, on the contrary, a slight tinge of amused condescension in her manner towards them.

When the concert—which no one except the proud parents of the performers, and then only when their own daughters were on the stage, very much enjoyed—was over, supper, followed by a small dance, took place. As a rule, the majority of the guests left immediately after supper; but this evening the music, as played by the good-natured little Fräulein, sounded so inspiring and the floor looked so good that none of them showed a disposition to hurry their departure, and the big school-room was soon filled with revolving couples. Both Hammond and young Burke hastened to ask Ethel to dance, but she refused them both on the ground that she had been engaged for the first waltz for over a fortnight to little Helen Longman, who, with implicit confidence in Ethel's promise, had run up to claim her partner.

Miss Longman, who was sitting with a group of ladies and gentlemen on the platform surveying the scene, was pleased when she saw her small niece being skilfully piloted in and out among the other couples by Ethel.

Not every girl, she reflected, would have kept her promise to dance with a child when she could have had half a dozen grown-up partners for every dance. Ethel might have—indeed had—her faults, but her word at any rate could be relied upon. And Miss Longman knew Ethel thoroughly. She had been under her care since the age of twelve, and during those six years Miss Longman had never known Ethel to deviate in the slightest degree from the truth. And she was confident that some day, when the spirit of intolerance that Ethel was wont to manifest to those who, either through timidity or a flaw in their characters, did not adhere as strictly to the truth in all matters as she did had become softened by a wider knowledge of human nature, she would become as sweet and lovable a girl as she was at present a brilliant and popular one.

Chapter II.

ETHEL MEETS HER COUSIN.

THE next day Ida Green, in a crowded third-class carriage, travelled north from Euston; while Ethel, comfortably seated in the corner of a first-class carriage, which she had entirely to herself, travelled west from Paddington. It was not a through journey to Torleigh, which was the nearest station to Nutcombe. At Newton Abbot she had to change from the express into a slow local, which, after a tedious wait of over forty minutes to begin with, would duly convey her, stopping at every station on the way, no matter how small, to Torleigh.

But once Newton Abbot was left behind, Ethel, however impatient she might be at their slow rate of progress, always felt she was so near home that a little delay did not matter very much. Every bit of the way was well known to her, and she craned her head first out of one window, then out of the other, as landmarks familiar to her since her childhood came into view, and were slowly passed and left behind again. There, below them, was the road along which Rob Roy, terrified at the sudden approach of a train, had bolted, placing the lives of herself, her uncle, and the groom in imminent peril. She had held the reins, and the worst part

of that adventure, she remembered, had not been the fear of an accident, but the humiliating consciousness that her uncle was right, and she wrong, and that Rob Roy, quiet though his behaviour was in general, would be unmanageable by her if he took fright. But that, mused Ethel, had happened years ago—eighteen months, to be precise—and her wrists were stronger and her skill greater now than then. The soft, delicious air, which, as it blew from end to end of the carriage, seemed to bring with it an odour of damp moss and ferns and cool, shady lanes, was sniffed appreciatively by Ethel. No air, she was wont to declare, could smell like the air of Devonshire; and it was as well that the guard, who knew her well, and whose friendly, respectful greeting had seemed part of her home-coming, had secured her the carriage to herself, for the evening was becoming slightly chilly, and a less enthusiastic appreciator of that same Devonshire air might have thought that there was rather too much of it in the carriage. The redness of the soil and the exceeding greenness of the fields came in also for their share of admiration. Though Londoners might rave if they pleased over their foggy red London sunsets, they ought to come west and watch the sun go down, as she was watching it now, in a glory of real crimson and gold over the darkening, purple moor, and be silenced.

It was small wonder that with so many other things to occupy her mind Ethel had little leisure to think of the meeting with her new aunt and cousin that awaited her; in fact, it was only as the already slow and much overdue train slowed down as they neared Torleigh that she recol-

lected their existence sufficiently to hope that they had not come to meet her.

Her wish was gratified, for, as the train glided past into the station, she caught a glimpse of the high wheeled dog-cart which, in accordance with her express desire, was always, no matter what the weather or the time of year, sent to the station to meet her on her home-coming, and which had no back seat.

An elderly groom, whose grim, taciturn face lightened into a smile of welcome as Ethel, leaning out of the window, waved her hand to him, was seated in it; and though she experienced a momentary sense of disappointment that her uncle had not come to meet her, she was quickly consoled by the thought that Bates could not only tell her all she wanted to know about her various pets, but that he would also consent—which Sir Laurence would not have done—to let her drive.

A civil porter hurried forward to take her bag and her bundle of wraps and umbrellas, the stationmaster touched his cap as she passed out and hoped she was well, a farmer alighting from a third-class carriage greeted her in the broad, homely Devonshire accent, and for one and all Ethel had a pleasant word and smile.

"Well, Bates," she said, as she paused to pat Rob Roy's velvety nose, "and how are you?"

"Pretty middlin', I'm glad to say, Miss Ethel. Thank goodness, I'm not always complainin' of ache and pains like the wimmen folk. I have a touch of the rheumatics, but I'm not given to complainin'."

Ethel laughed as she sprang lightly into the dog-cart and took the reins.

It was well known that Bates had never a good word for the sex that he contemptuously termed the "wimmen folk." It was also a joke against him that, while despising the weaker sex for complaining about their ailments, he was by no means above trying to get sympathy for his own.

Ethel, however, had scant attention to spare for his ailments, and as soon as the porter had stowed away her dressing bag and bundle of wraps, and had promised to see that her trunks should be in readiness for the luggage-cart, she drove out of the station.

"It's splendid to be home again," Ethel said, gazing about her with delighted eyes, as, after passing through the long, straggling High Street, they left the shops of the small town behind them and turned into the country roads leading to Nutcombe. "And now you can tell me all the news, Bates."

"News, Miss Ethel! Well, I reckon there ain't no news to tell you forby the fact that Mrs. and Miss Nugent, your aunt and cousin, have come to live with us. And that, no doubt, Sir Laurence has told you."

"Oh yes," said Ethel; "I've heard that. I did not know before what their name was, though. However, it's not about them that I wanted you to tell me. As usual, though, I see I shall have to find out anything I want to know from you by questions. What is Polly's foal like?"

"The prettiest little thing you ever saw, Miss Ethel: just as graceful a little colt as we have ever had on the

farm. Sir Laurence is waiting for you to give it a name. Yes, Polly may well be proud of it; and proud she is, too. To see her stand in the field watching it at its games is as good as a play. But she won't allow no one, excepting me and Jim, to go near it."

Bates was genuinely fond of animals; they were, indeed, the only subject on which he could be induced to talk at any length—certainly with any enthusiasm. And though it was only by dint of a series of questions that Ethel managed to obtain information as to the welfare of the various horses and dogs and live stock generally that belonged to the model farm which was Sir Laurence's chief hobby, she succeeded at length in learning a good deal of what she wanted to know.

Donah, the smart but intractable donkey, which, to gratify a whim of Ethel's, her uncle had bought for her last Christmas, was well in health, but spoiling for want of regular exercise. Since she had bolted with the little light cart, something in the shape of a coster's barrow, that had been built especially for her, smashing it to bits, and had also overturned the bath chair with old Mrs. Williams in it, who had been recommended gentle exercise, and to whom Sir Laurence, with the idea of doing a kindness to a neighbour, had lent both donkey and chair, no further use had been found for her; and she was now leading a leisurely life, and no doubt planning further mischief should she again be required to work for her living. Jack, the good-looking, high-spirited pony, that Ethel had ridden since she was a little girl, was out at grass, and looking so absurdly young

that no one would give him credit for the fifteen years that had passed over his head.

"His coat is that beautiful, and his knees that straight, Miss Ethel, that, just to look at him, one would think he was only rising six or seven, and scarcely that."

"Dear old boy," said Ethel. "But all the same, Bates, one cannot forget his real age when one is on his back, and it would be cruel to ride him regularly. And now that I have come home for good I mean to ride a good deal. I shall want three horses at least of my very own. Do you know if Uncle Laurence has been looking out for any for me?"

"Well, no, Miss Ethel, I can't say as I do. Exeter Show is coming on next month, though, and maybe he might take a fancy to something there. But you know as well as I knows that Sir Laurence don't like buying horses wot he don't know something of—particularly when it would be for your use."

"Exeter Show. That's a good idea," Ethel said, paying no heed to the last half of Bates's speech. "I shall certainly get Uncle Laurence to go to it. Why, that's where I saw Rob Roy, and persuaded uncle to buy him."

"And he ran away with us, and nearly killed us all, before we had driven him many times," interposed Bates, a sly twinkle appearing in his shrewd blue eyes.

"I thought I should scarcely get home without being reminded of that old tale," laughed Ethel. "But I drive better now than I did then. Even you must own that."

"But your driving is none too perfect yet," said Bates.

Unexpected point was given to the old groom's stricture the next moment. During the last ten minutes they had been slowly mounting a long and somewhat steep ascent. Rob Roy, if not interfered with, took all hills in a very leisurely manner, but as soon as the top was reached it was his habit to break into a very swift trot indeed, and Ethel, forgetful of his ways and unprepared for the sudden change in their rate of progress, narrowly escaped driving into the hedge as they rounded the corner. She and Bates had little time for conversation after that. The road was narrow, and Rob Roy, anxious for his supper, swung along the winding, twisting road at a speed that made care in driving absolutely necessary. But Ethel had him well in hand, nevertheless, and she thoroughly enjoyed the rapid motion through the cool, sweet evening air. The hedges on either side of the road were too high to admit of an uninterrupted view of the scenery, but now and again through a gap in the high bushes that bordered the grassy banks, or over a gate, glimpses could be caught of the sea on the right hand, and an extensive stretch of undulating green fields on the left. After bowling along in this manner for nearly a couple of miles they reached a point where the road divided, and a turning to the left led down a short steep road, which, after passing the big white gate that was the entrance to Nutcombe House, went down the hill towards the combe, narrowing as it went, until from being a road it became a lane, and from a lane a steep footpath.

But Ethel turned smartly in at the gate, and the wheels

of the dog-cart rolled easily and almost noiselessly up the smooth, well-kept avenue, between the high, graceful deodar trees that bordered it on either side. A flight of steps led down from the hall door to the circular sweep lying immediately beneath them, and Ethel glanced eagerly towards them as she came up the drive, fully expecting to see her uncle waiting there to receive her. For when he did not come to the station he rarely failed to be on the steps to greet her on her arrival, and she was considerably surprised to find that on this occasion he had departed from his usual rule, and that his familiar figure was not awaiting her on the steps.

As she pulled up an elderly man-servant, who had evidently been on the lookout for her, came as hurriedly as his somewhat stiff joints would allow down the steps.

"Sir Laurence is walking in the garden with Mrs. and Miss Nugent," he informed her, reading aright the expectant glance which she had directed towards the door. "I told him ten minutes ago that you might be expected any moment, but he only said, 'All right, Roberts, all right. I'll be there.' But it is all wrong, for Sir Laurence is not here."

Roberts, like Bates, was a privileged servant, and had been in Sir Laurence's employ for a great number of years. Like Bates, he was devoted to Ethel, and he was already inclined to be jealous on her behalf of the strangers who had taken up their abode in her old home. But Ethel, not being in the very least of an exacting nature, did not feel at all aggrieved at her uncle's absence.

As she ran up the steps she nearly stumbled over a beautiful collie that came bounding through the hall to meet her, overwhelming her with caresses.

"Hullo, you dear old Buns!" she said, catching hold of his paws, and kissing him on the forehead. "So you found me out, did you? Come along then, and we'll go and find Uncle Laurie. It was dreadful of him not to be here, wasn't it, Buns?"

"Ah, it's like Miss Ethel to take everything so light-heartedly," said Roberts, as, with a lugubrious expression on his always solemn face, he collected his young mistress's belongings. "But she won't be quite so light-hearted when she finds herself ousted out of Sir Laurence's 'ome and 'eart."

"The master he ban't the sort to forget old friends for new," said Bates, his broad Devonshire accent contrasting strongly with Roberts's correct tones. "So put that notion out of your head, and don't go filling Miss Ethel's with the like nonsense."

The old butler looked very disgusted at this crushing remark, but maintained a dignified silence under it. Indeed, there was no time allowed him for a retort even had he thought of one, for Bates, chuckling sardonically to himself at having secured the last word, drove round to the stables.

Though friends in the main, and with a full recognition of each other's good qualities, the two old servants rarely met without sparring, and each was a little jealous of the esteem in which Sir Laurence held the other.

Meanwhile Ethel, with Buns careering round her and giving vent to his excitement by a series of short, sharp barks, was making her way across the big, square hall to a glass door opening on to the veranda.

Nutcombe House was famed, even in that neighbourhood of pretty places, for its lovely garden and beautiful views. The house stood in the curve of the bay from which it took its name, nestling among the big trees that grew in the sheltered combe. It was fully open to the south, commanding a magnificent view over the sea. Immediately beneath the veranda lay a wide level lawn, screened from the south-west gales by a hedge of fuchsia trees, just then in full bloom, while beyond this hedge a smooth expanse of equally close shorn turf sloped gently to the edge of the cliff. The grass was dotted with fine deodar trees and big, rather formally clipped, evergreen bushes, and was separated from the fields that lay on either side by sunk fences, so that there was no obstruction to hide the view of the beautiful coast-line that could be obtained from all parts of the garden.

But although Ethel paused for a moment on the veranda, it was not to admire the view that lay before her. Her eager gaze swept it merely in the hope of seeing her uncle; and not discerning him immediately, she lingered there in momentary uncertainty whether to go round to the fields and the farm that lay at the back of the house, or to explore the sides of the cliffs. She had very nearly decided in favour of the farm, when two figures came leisurely into view round one of the bushes

at the far end of the lawn, and as one of them was her uncle, Ethel, uttering an exclamation of delight, ran full tilt across the grass towards him.

Sir Laurence Dunmayne was a man of about sixty, with gray hair and a kindly, genial countenance that was a true index to his nature. An honourable, upright man, he took it for granted that every one was like himself, and it was one of the hardest things in the world to make him believe otherwise. He never harboured an unkind thought of any one, but always believed the best possible of his fellow creatures, whom, greatly sometimes to their amusement, he accepted at their own estimation. But then as people strove, almost unconsciously to themselves, to be at their best with him, and to suppress everything that would not meet with his approval, he had more justification in thinking well of them than their own friends and acquaintances, to whom they showed themselves as they really were. Beside Sir Laurence walked a lady who could be none other than his step-sister, while at some little distance behind them a girl of about Ethel's own age loitered slowly along by the edge of the cliff. But neither upon her nor upon her mother did Ethel bestow much attention. She had eyes only for her uncle as she hastened towards him.

But though due notice of her rapid approach had been given by Buns, who, uttering loud, joyous barks that could have been heard many fields away, was scampering at her side, Sir Laurence seemed more intent upon finishing what he was saying to his sister than upon greeting his niece.

His face was very serious as he spoke, and hers was very agitated. But before Ethel was near enough to overhear their conversation he brought it to an abrupt close, and as she flung her arms round his neck and gave him a warm hug, he kissed her affectionately.

Meanwhile Mrs. Nugent stood quietly by, waiting until their greetings were over. She was a pale, slight little woman, dressed entirely in black; and though she held herself well, and still had a pretty, youthful figure, the abundant streaks of gray in her brown hair, a certain tired look in her eyes, and some haggard lines round her mouth, contradicted the first impression that a stranger would form as to her age, and led to the subsequent belief that she was many years older than would at first sight appear. Yet the first impression would, nevertheless, be the right one. For though, seen by the searching light of day, Mrs. Nugent looked fully as old as her step-brother, she was in reality some fifteen or sixteen years his junior.

"Naughty Uncle Laurie!" Ethel exclaimed, in clear, ringing tones. "You weren't at the station, and you weren't at the hall door. It is the very first time you have ever given me such a shabby welcome."

"My dear," Sir Laurence exclaimed, with instant compunction visible on his kind face, "I am more than sorry, but your aunt was telling me—" At that point he broke off abruptly. Evidently it was not his intention to repeat what he had just heard. "Let me introduce you to your aunt. This, my dear Isabel," turning to

Mrs. Nugent, who had banished all traces of the agitation that had marked her on Ethel's approach, and who had summoned a smile—a forced one, it is true, but none the less a kindly meant one—to her face, “is my niece Ethel. And I think that she is a very fortunate girl to have suddenly acquired so delightful an aunt and cousin.”

“Say, rather, that it is Violet and I who are fortunate to find that your niece is such a charming girl, Laurence,” said Mrs. Nugent in pleasant tones, putting out two pretty little hands loaded with sparkling rings and drawing Ethel towards her. “She might so easily have been a disagreeable person, who would have resented the intrusion of two strangers into her home. As it is, I can see that she is going to love us as much as we already love her. Look, there is my dear child over there, waiting to take you into her heart. I hope I am right, my dear Ethel, in thinking that you do love us already?”

The question put Ethel in rather a quandary. As a matter of fact she was not greatly attracted by her new aunt, who struck her as rather an artificial person. And to say that she loved a person whom as yet she was not even certain that she would like would not be honest. Neither had she as yet had an opportunity of taking a good look at Violet, whom Ethel, turning to look in the direction pointed out to her by her aunt, perceived to be standing at the edge of the cliff some twenty or thirty yards away. The hasty glance Ethel shot at her as her aunt spoke told her that her cousin wore a trailing white dress and a big, shady-brimmed hat, that she was short

and rather fat, and that she had fair hair. How could she say that she loved a girl of whom she knew nothing more than that?

Sir Laurence saved the situation.

"You must give her time, my dear Isabel," he said. "You see she does not know you yet; when she does, she will love you, I am sure. But Ethel is thoroughly English, and very undemonstrative where her affections are concerned."

"Ah, I see," said Mrs. Nugent, who still, somewhat to Ethel's discomfort, held her hands, from time to time bestowing a gentle pressure upon them. "She has the cold, cautious nature of all you English. Now, my Violet and I are so warm-hearted, so impulsive."

"But aren't you English?" exclaimed the downright Ethel, in astonishment.

"A fair question," said Sir Laurence, laughing. "To hear you speak of 'you English,' my dear Isabel, one would imagine that you were a foreigner. I never knew before that you considered yourself one."

"I have lived so much abroad, and have so many French friends, that I must be forgiven for having fallen into the way of thinking that I am not quite English," said Mrs. Nugent, with a pensive air. "But there, my dear Ethel, I am keeping you from my sweet Violet, and I know you must be longing to make her acquaintance. Girls always have so much to say to one another, so many confidences to whisper in each other's ears, that I feel sure that from this moment you will be inseparable.—"

"Violet! Violet!" she called, raising her voice, and accenting the second syllable of her daughter's name to such an extent that it sounded at least twice its usual length. "No, the dear child does not hear. She is absorbed in the sea, which seems to exercise a wonderful fascination over her, and she would stand in that entranced, rapt attitude for hours, I believe."

"Violet!" shouted Sir Laurence, "here is Ethel. Come and shake hands with her."

"Never mind, Uncle Laurence. I'll run and say, 'How do you do' to her," said Ethel, glad of an excuse to withdraw her hands from the affectionate clasp in which Mrs. Nugent held them, "and then you shall take me round to the farm, and we will poke round generally until dinner time."

And without waiting for a reply Ethel hastened towards the spot where Violet still stood gazing out to sea. Even though she had not heard her mother and her uncle call her, it seemed hard to believe that she could be unaware of Ethel's approach; yet it was not until her cousin was within a yard of her that she slowly turned her head and faced her.

Violet Nugent was a fair-haired girl, with big blue eyes, and a fair pink-and-white complexion. She ought to have been pretty, but one or two little things marred her appearance. One was the look of extreme self-consciousness that was imprinted on her face; another, a trick she had of making perpetual play with her eyes, and casting sidelong, upward glances at those around her, as

if to see what impression she was producing on them. In stature she was short and inclined to stoutness, and her waist might have been at least two inches larger than it actually was.

Ethel took in all this at a glance, and mentally summed up her cousin's character in three words: "Silly, affected, conceited." But Violet, happily unaware of the hasty, unfavourable verdict that had been passed upon her, held out her hand with a smile, and glancing at Ethel with her head very much on one side, said in slow, drawling tones,—

"I am sure—yes, I feel quite sure—that you are my cousin, Ethel Dunmayne."

"And equally, of course, you are Violet Nugent," said Ethel.

Violet gave a little affected shriek of dismay, and, considerably to Ethel's astonishment, she put her hands up to her ears.

"Ah, no, no!" she said, "not Vi-er-let! That is such a dreadful, dreadful name. Say Vi-o-let. Pronounced so, it is a lovely name, soft and musical. Violet—it is like the sighing of the wind in the fir trees. Don't you think so?"

"I don't know. I have never thought about it," returned Ethel bluntly, divided between a strong desire to laugh and a rising feeling of exasperation.

"So few English people pronounce their vowels quite purely, and to any one afflicted, as I am, with a sensitive ear, it is a great trial to listen to them," pursued Violet,

in her stilted, mincing tones. "But we have not yet shaken hands. You don't mind my correcting you about my name, do you? But it is better to point out a thing like that at once. And you will try and say Violet, won't you?"

"Certainly, if you like it so," returned Ethel, rather impatiently. "I didn't know I had said Vi-er-let, but I will lay special stress on the 'o' in the future. Vi-o-let! There, how do you like that?"

"A little bit too marked, I think," said Violet, who, with her hands loosely clasped and hanging down straight in front of her, and with her head held slightly on one side, was looking pensively at her cousin; "it sounds prettier when I say it myself. Vi-o-let. The 'o' should be just a little, almost imperceptibly, drawn out. It is not sufficient merely to emphasize it."

"Oh, well I shall get it as you like it in time," said Ethel, who was of the opinion that they had spent more than enough time on the discussion. "You see you have had more practice at it than I have."

"Oh no, I haven't!" Violet cried hastily. "I am younger than you are, Ethel. I am only seventeen, and you are eighteen, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am eighteen. But what I meant to say was that you have had more practice in pronouncing your own name simply because it is your own, and you seem to be very particular about it."

"Still, you are a year, a whole year, older than I am," persisted Violet. "Uncle Laurence told me your age

exactly, so I must try and remember that you are my senior, and come to you for advice, and defer to you in every way."

"A very excellent idea," said Ethel, who really hardly knew if Violet was in jest or earnest, and did not think it worth while to find out. She wondered, if she were to tell Violet not to be affected or silly, whether that piece of advice would be taken.

"You don't mind my knowing your age, I hope?" Violet went on. "Uncle Laurence told it to me, so it was not my fault. I did not ask him how old you were."

"But I don't mind your knowing in the least," Ethel returned. "Why should I mind?"

"You don't look nearly your age, though; you don't look a day over fifteen," added Violet earnestly. "Really, no one would take you for anything like eighteen."

"Wouldn't they?" said Ethel, stifling a yawn. "Well, if they took me for much younger, they would be rather silly, wouldn't they? Few girls of fifteen are as tall as I am, to begin with, neither do they wear their hair up."

"You are not so much taller than I am," Violet said, suddenly quitting the subject of their ages to discuss that of their respective heights, "and by the time I have finished growing I shall be quite as tall as you are, perhaps even taller."

Ethel glanced down at her cousin as they stood shoulder to shoulder. Although Violet had hurriedly taken up her position on slightly rising ground before she measured herself against her cousin, she was very nearly a head

shorter than her tall cousin, who, surveying her critically, came to the conclusion that Violet had already done growing. However, as it was not a subject in which she took much interest, she did not see the use of arguing about it. Violet, too, showed no inclination to pursue the topic. A slight cloud had settled upon her face when she perceived, as she could not help doing, that her cousin was considerably taller than herself; and when Ethel suggested that they should return to the house, she gave a somewhat sulky assent.

"Weren't you surprised when you heard that mother and I had come to live here?" she asked, after a pause.

"Well, yes, I was rather," Ethel said, turning to whistle to Buns, who, with a desire to go for a scramble down the cliffs plainly written on his face, was looking after his mistress in a very disappointed way.

"Were you glad?"

"I wasn't either glad or sorry," answered Ethel, with perfect honesty. "You see one can't feel much interest in people one doesn't know—can one?"

"But I have been just longing to know you ever since I came," said Violet, and the exceeding warmth of her tone made Ethel feel conscious of the coldness of her reply. "You and I must be great friends, Ethel. You shall tell me all your secrets, and I will tell you all mine, and we will have nothing hidden from each other. Won't that be nice?"

"It wouldn't be quite a fair bargain," Ethel answered, "for I don't think I have got anything to hide from anybody."

Violet gave a little giggle.

"Oh, I am sure that couldn't be true," she said. "Do you mean to say that you tell everything you do to Uncle Laurence, for instance?"

"Why, of course," said Ethel, looking at her cousin with as much surprise as her cousin was looking at her. "Why should I want to hide anything from him?"

"Oh, you really cannot expect me to believe that!" Violet exclaimed, with another giggle.

"You need not believe it unless you like," she said coldly, "but it is not my habit to say anything that is not true."

"I was only joking, of course," Violet said, giving her a quick, sidelong glance from underneath her eyelashes. "Please don't look so angry, Ethel. One would think I had said something dreadful. When you know me better you will know that I am always joking. Mother says that I am never serious for five minutes together. Oh dear," she added, with a little sigh of exhaustion, "you really should not make me laugh so much, but the quick way you took me up was quite too killing for words. I almost wish I had led you on a little more. But you are not angry with me now any more, are you?"

She slipped her arm within Ethel's as she spoke, and looked pleadingly up into her cousin's face.

"You haven't kissed me yet, Ethel," she said in plaintive tones. "You are so dreadfully reserved and cold that I am beginning to be quite afraid of you, and until you have kissed me I shall not feel that we are friends."

Ethel could not do less than comply with Violet's

request to be kissed. But there was a certain constraint in her manner as she did so. In her heart of hearts she knew that not only had she no affection to offer her cousin at present, but that it was only too probable that the more she knew of her the less she would like her.

The kiss was therefore a somewhat perfunctory one, and as soon as she had bestowed it she disengaged herself from Violet's clinging embrace, and telling her that she was going to find her uncle and go round the farm with him, she whistled to Buns and went into the house.

Dinner was not until half-past eight, and as it was not yet much past seven, Ethel thought that there would be plenty of time to pay a brief visit to some of her favourite points of interest. At that hour her uncle was usually to be found in his study enjoying the *Times*, and with the intention of dragging him relentlessly from his armchair and newspaper, Ethel invaded his sanctum. This evening, however, he was not there, and Buns, after officiously searching every corner of the room, came back to his mistress as she stood on the doorstep and assured her in his own language that she was indeed perfectly right in supposing that the room was empty. He had been round it, and under the table, and he knew.

"Where can Uncle Laurence be?" Ethel was asking herself in perplexity, when his voice, speaking in low, earnest tones, came to her through the drawing-room door, which was ajar. Without giving herself time to reflect that he was probably engaged with Mrs. Nugent, she pushed it open and walked in.

"Oh, here you are, Uncle Laurence!" she exclaimed; "do come out. If we hurry, there is just time to go for our usual stroll before the bell rings. I want to see the new Kerry calf, and Polly's foal, and oh! lots of things."

Mrs. Nugent was sitting in a reclining attitude on a low couch drawn close to the long French window, while Sir Laurence, with his hands in his pockets, was pacing up and down before her.

"Not just now, my dear," her uncle answered, turning round. "I am busy talking to your aunt. By-and-by, perhaps—or no," drawing out his watch, "it is getting rather late; we had better postpone our stroll until to-morrow."

"Oh, all right, Uncle Laurence," Ethel said, but in rather a disappointed tone nevertheless. And then, as he was obviously waiting until he and his sister were alone again before he resumed their conversation, she abruptly withdrew, closing the door behind her. She felt as sorry on her uncle's account as on her own that their usual programme could not be adhered to on this occasion. He always thoroughly enjoyed showing her any improvements or alterations that had been made on the farm during her absence, and she felt sure that he would much rather have gone out with her than have stayed in the drawing-room with her aunt. However, she knew that it was his rule to put duty strictly before pleasure; and, after all, she could very well wait until the morrow. Somewhat to her surprise—for she had not heard her footsteps—she perceived that her cousin had followed her

into the hall, and was standing by a table arranging some long sprays of fuchsias in a tall glass.

"Do you generally go for a walk round the farm with Uncle Laurence on your first evening, then?" she asked, stepping back a little and surveying with her head on one side the arrangement she had just effected.

"Always," Ethel answered. "I don't think Uncle Laurence has ever before missed taking me round on my first evening. It has been quite a recognized thing between us for ages that my first visit of inspection to the farm should be paid directly I got home, and with him, and he was always quite as keen on showing me everything as I was on seeing it. So, although there would be time for me to take a scamper round by myself, I shall wait until to-morrow."

"I am afraid," Violet observed, as with deft fingers she went on with her work, "that both you and I will find ourselves rather left out in the cold with Uncle Laurence now. He is so pleased at having mother to talk to and to discuss things with that he will not want any one else. You see mother is more of an age to be a suitable companion to him than we are, so I for one shall not grumble when they go off together for drives or walks, or shut themselves up for hours together talking, talking, as they are now."

"I daresay you wouldn't," returned Ethel, "for, after all, you scarcely know him. But Uncle Laurence and I are far too good chums for him to throw me over like that. He will have enough time to spare both for

your mother and for me, you will see. I was early trained not to be too greedy about Uncle Laurence's society, for he is such a favourite that every one likes to be with him."

Violet became suddenly silent, and the dressing bell ringing at that moment, she left the hall and went upstairs.

Ethel, who had thrown herself into a comfortable chair, lingered a few minutes longer, her eyes fixed half-absently on the litter of leaves and stalks with which Violet had covered the table.

It had not hitherto occurred to her that she would see less of her uncle in future, and the idea was not altogether a welcome one. But it amused her nevertheless to perceive, as she had not failed to do, that Violet suspected her of feeling jealous. She would have been considerably startled had she known that Violet had spoken with the deliberate intention of provoking her to jealousy. Ethel had her faults, though she herself was not particularly alive to them, but jealousy, at any rate, was not among them; and if Sir Laurence had ignored her existence for a full week to come, it would never have entered her head to become distrustful of his affection for her, or to grow hurt and offended with him.

Chapter III.

NUTCOMBE HOUSE.

NUTCOMBE HOUSE had been built many years before the neighbouring town of Torleigh had grown from a mere fishing village to its present state of prosperity. It had been designed by a retired admiral, who had had his own notions upon the subject of architecture, and enough money—for they were expensive notions—to carry them out. His chief idea had been that every room on the ground floor should be of sufficient size to allow of his pacing up and down as if he were on the quarter-deck of his ship, and that the hall should be big enough to entertain a whole ship's crew to dinner, should he be minded to invite them to dine there. As a result, Nutcombe House was unique of its kind, and a most delightful residence. The hall, which occupied the middle part of the house, was of noble proportions; and though since Sir Laurence had bought the place no ship's crew had ever dined there, no matter what they might have done in the admiral's time, Ethel had played cricket and rounders there as a child, and later on badminton and ping-pong. On hopelessly wet winter days the hall of Nutcombe House was looked upon by her friends as a capital rallying point, and it was no

uncommon thing for them to invade the house after lunch, play games all the afternoon, and, gladly accepting Sir Laurence's invitation to dinner, to stay and play more games or dance in the evening. When not in use as a playground, the hall was furnished as a sitting-room, and with its polished floors, oak tables laden with the latest magazines, bowls of flowers, and deep luxurious chairs and tiger-skins, it looked always the acme of comfort. Delightfully cool in summer, it was heated in winter by pipes, so that it was not surprising that, no matter what the time of year might be, the hall was considered by far the nicest part of the house in which to lounge away an idle half-hour.

At the far end, facing the door, there was a big conservatory, leading on one hand into the library and on the other into the drawing-room, both of which rooms had doors off the hall as well. A wide flight of shallow steps led to a broad gallery running round the hall, off which the principal bedrooms of the house opened. These were all large, spacious, comfortable rooms, with beautiful views. At one end of the gallery there was a green baize door, which, besides giving entrance to a side flight of stairs leading to the ground floor, opened into a long passage, which, after passing several doors, ended at the foot of a short spiral staircase, which led to one room only. And this room went by the name of the turret room, and being, in Ethel's opinion at least, far and away the nicest room in the house, had been many years ago appropriated by her as her bedroom.

It was a square room, standing well above the rest of the house, and lighted by four big bay windows, one in each wall, so that taking the view from one window to another Ethel could from her eyrie sweep the whole of the horizon. In the old admiral's time an enormous telescope, worked on a swivel, had occupied the middle of the room; for this had been his lookout, and when he was tired of pacing the hall below, he had been wont to retire to the turret room and scan the sea and land with his powerful telescope. But the aspect of the room had altered considerably since Ethel took possession of it, and now it was furnished as a comfortable, not to say luxurious, bedroom and sitting-room in one. A writing table stood underneath one window, a big armchair occupied another, and several shelves of books stood against the wall, so that if Ethel felt inclined for the privacy of her own room there was no need for her to lack occupation.

Ruby Mudge, Ethel's little maid, and the grand-daughter of Mrs. Mudge, the housekeeper, was kneeling before Ethel's trunk when her young mistress entered her bedroom this evening, busily engaged in unpacking her things. Ruby was a prim-looking maiden of seventeen or so, with light-brown eyes, flaxen hair, and big ears that stood out from her small head in a manner that was rather remarkable. Her grandmother, who, though fond of Ruby, had, as the old woman would herself have said, no great opinion of her, told her that these big ears were given to her in order that she might listen with especial care to everything that she and her young mistress said to her. But

Ruby was a born chatterer, and would much rather exercise her tongue than her ears, and she had hoped that, having been promoted from the position of sewing-maid to be Miss Ethel's lady's-maid, she would be allowed to talk to her young mistress as much as she pleased. But she had been doomed to disappointment, for she had speedily found that Miss Ethel abhorred gossip as much as her grandmother did, and that she was required to be very nearly as silent in the discharge of her new duties as she had been obliged to be while plying her needle in the housekeeper's room under the vigilant eye of her grandmother. But hitherto Ruby's new duties had been so light that they had merely supplemented and not released her from the old. Ethel required little personal attendance, and beyond being expected to keep her clothes in order, and her drawers and room tidy, Ruby was allowed to do little else for her. Occasionally when her long, thick hair was unmanageable from salt water, or tangled from having been blown about in a high wind, Ruby was required to brush it, but otherwise Ethel preferred to do everything for herself. But this evening Ruby was allowed to stay in the room while Ethel dressed for dinner, for she had left herself so short a time in which to get ready that she would certainly have been late if Ruby had not been there to give her assistance. Her love of gossip, though encouraged in some quarters, had in others brought down upon her so many severe snubs that Ruby, when in the presence of those who preferred her silence to her conversation, had acquired

a trick of pursing up the corners of her mouth and compressing her lips, as if determined that no single word should escape them. But as she shook out the folds of the white voile skirt which Ethel had worn the evening before, and which she had signified her intention of putting on again, it was obvious that Ruby had some information which she was more than usually anxious to impart; and at last she could keep it back no longer, but with an air of great pride announced that she was Miss Nugent's maid as well as Miss Ethel's now.

"And she lets me do a great deal more for her than you do, Miss Ethel," Ruby continued, her words fairly tripping over each other in her eagerness to get them out. "She likes me to brush her hair by the hour together, and sometimes I have to change her frock at least half a dozen times before she is satisfied. And I have to put on her boots, and be in her room to unlace them when she comes in; and she likes me to put out every single thing for her, and to put them away again. Not a hand's turn will Miss Violet do for herself. Oh, I am a proper lady's-maid now, and no mistake."

It was in no spirit of grumbling that Ruby spoke of her new duties; she was so obviously proud and triumphant that she was what she called "a real lady's-maid" at last, that her enthusiasm brought a smile to Ethel's face.

"And Miss Violet says that I am a very good, clever maid, and as good as a French maid any day."

A smile, not untinged with contempt at such an outrageous piece of flattery on Violet's part, curled the corners

of Ethel's mouth, and she told Ruby somewhat abruptly that she would not require her any more that evening.

Ethel had not been alone many minutes before a slow, heavy step was heard mounting the spiral staircase; and the slight cloud clearing from her face, and giving place to a smile of welcome, Ethel turned to greet a stout, motherly-looking old woman dressed in black silk, and wearing a smart lace cap over her hair, which was arranged in little tight gray corkscrew curls. This was Mrs. Mudge, Ethel's old nurse, and Sir Laurence's present housekeeper.

Mrs. Mudge's face was round and rosy, and would have looked the essence of good-nature had it not been for the pair of exceedingly shrewd, penetrating black eyes that gleamed behind her horn-rimmed spectacles. Few things escaped the glance of those sharp black eyes, and it was mainly owing to them that Sir Laurence's house had never suffered from the want of a mistress. Under her wise and capable rule everything had run as smoothly as possible; and when his lady neighbours grumbled about their servants or spoke of the utter impossibility of getting a good cook nowadays, Sir Laurence would laughingly advise them to secure another Mrs. Mudge and place her at the head of affairs.

Ethel had a great affection for her old nurse, who for her part fairly worshipped her young mistress, and thought there was no young lady in the world like her Miss Ethel.

Each time Ethel came back from school, Mrs. Mudge made a point of seeing her as soon as possible, in order

to assure herself with her own eyes that Miss Ethel was really as well as she was when she went away at the end of the last holidays. And it was a matter of constant surprise to her that her young mistress should return each time in such radiant health and spirits, considering in what place the intervening three months had been spent. For Mrs. Mudge had the poorest possible opinion of London, which she invariably described as that "nasty, dingy, dirty place, where it was well-nigh impossible for a clean country body to keep clear of smuts."

Mrs. Mudge had only been once to town in her life, and that was to pay a short visit to her daughter-in-law, Ruby's mother, since dead, who lived then in some slums near Waterloo Bridge. The visit had been paid in November, and had lasted nearly a week, during the whole of which time dense fogs had hung over the city. Her daughter-in-law had been ill and unable to stir far from her poor rooms, and as Mrs. Mudge had firmly refused to go sightseeing alone, she had, at the end of her visit, taken away with her the firm impression that the whole of London consisted of narrow, squalid streets, and lay always under a thick, black fog. That being so, it was a constant source of wonder to Mrs. Mudge that Sir Laurence should send his niece to such a place, and an equally surprising fact that Ethel should return at the end of each term in such splendid health and spirits.

Mrs. Mudge had not time for much more than a hasty glimpse of Ethel before the second gong, the echoes of

which were only faintly heard in the turret room, sounded through the house. But that glimpse had, at any rate, satisfied Mrs. Mudge that her former charge was in the possession of her usual excellent health, and she felt well repaid for her long climb up to Ethel's eyrie. But though Mrs. Mudge would not have acknowledged this even to herself, it was not solely for the sake of seeing whether Ethel were looking well that she had taken that toilsome climb this evening. She would also have liked to hear what Ethel thought of the fact of her aunt and cousin having come to live at Nutcombe.

"There's changes in the house since you were here last, my dearie," she began tentatively, as Ethel, hastily snatching up a handkerchief, prepared to rush from the room. Unpunctuality was displeasing to Sir Laurence. "I mean," as Ethel paused to look inquiringly at her, "you've got a new aunt and cousin since you were here last, Miss Ethel."

"Oh, yes," said Ethel, and paused. Not even with her dear old nurse could she discuss her new relations, more especially as she did not feel at all drawn to either of them. "There's a new horse in the stables too," she added, with a swift though not very dexterous change of topic, "and I haven't even seen him yet. Well, I must rush, or I shall be late. Good-bye, and thanks awfully for coming up to see me."

The last words floated up the spiral staircase, down which Ethel had begun to run in the middle of her sentence.

Mrs. Mudge shook her head as she rose from the easy-chair in which Ethel had installed her, and prepared to

take her departure also, although by no means at the same rate of speed.

"Miss Ethel doesn't like them, it's easy to see that, although she passed it off so indifferent like," the old woman said to herself; "and I should not be a bit surprised if there was to be trouble between Miss Violet and her one day. For though Miss Violet may be a nice young lady enough in her way, her way is not Miss Ethel's way."

Ethel reached the drawing-room just as the gong finished its summons to dinner, and found her aunt seated there alone before a fire that had evidently only just been lighted.

"Who ever wants a fire on an evening in July!" Ethel exclaimed, pausing in amazement on the threshold; then as Mrs. Nugent gave a slight shiver, and spread her fingers to the blaze, she found an answer to her question.

"I am nearly always cold," her aunt said half apologetically, "and this Devonshire air of yours has a chilly feeling about it even in the height of summer. What it must be in the winter, I am sure I cannot imagine." And Mrs. Nugent sighed and shivered again.

"But come here, Ethel," she resumed in a more animated tone, "and let me have a look at you. I have hardly seen you as yet. Oh, what a sweetly pretty dress you have on, dear, and how charmingly you have done your hair! White is quite your colour, I should say."

In obedience to her aunt's summons Ethel advanced slowly, and, if the truth were known, rather unwillingly, towards the hearthrug. For one thing, she disliked per-

sonal remarks; and for another, she would rather have remained near the open window. But Mrs. Nugent, in happy ignorance of her niece's sentiments at the moment, proceeded to scrutinize her frankly, and to impart with equal frankness the results of that scrutiny.

"My dear," she said, "you are an exceedingly pretty girl."

A slightly annoyed look accompanied the flush that rose to Ethel's face at that opening remark; but though Mrs. Nugent could not fail to notice the accession of colour, her niece's annoyance escaped her observation.

"Ah, you don't need me to tell you that, I expect," she added, with a little laugh. "And how tall you are, Ethel—tall and slight. Your figure is very good, and you hold yourself so well. It is a great thing for a girl to carry herself well. If she is not really tall, it adds height to her; and if she is tall, it gives her a look of stateliness that cannot be otherwise obtained. Your eyes, I think, are like your uncle's, but it is a little hard to be sure in this light; and your complexion, even for a Devonshire girl, is beautiful. Yes, Ethel, I think I may be proud of my new niece; don't you think so?"

All things considered, Ethel felt that that was a difficult question for her to answer; but she was saved the necessity of a reply, for at that moment her uncle came into the room. His first exclamation, like Ethel's, had reference to the heat of the room; but glancing from the fire to his sister he checked himself, and expressed a hope that she had not taken cold in the garden.

As the evening was unusually warm even for the close of July, Ethel's eyebrows expressed some astonishment at the idea that any one could have taken cold on such an evening.

"Oh, but you do not know what a martyr I am to rheumatism and neuralgia," Mrs. Nugent said, answering Ethel's unspoken thought. "I may say that I am never free from pain, and the slightest chill or draught brings on agonies, simply agonies."

Mrs. Nugent smiled again as she spoke. She had a singularly sweet smile, and cordially as Ethel already disliked her new aunt's rather gushing manner and the string of flattering remarks she had been pleased to make to her, she liked her smile. Violet had not yet come down; and as her mother said with a laugh that it was of no use to wait for her, for she was quite incurably unpunctual, Sir Laurence rather silently offered his arm to his sister, and led the way with her into the dining-room.

A slightly puzzled frown puckered Ethel's forehead as she strolled leisurely in their wake. Surely for one who suffered such perpetual pain her aunt laughed and talked a good deal, and appeared likewise in the best of spirits. And though the smart, fashionably-made low neck-dress she wore suited her admirably and made her look at least ten years younger than she had done at their first introduction, Ethel could not help reflecting that as she felt the cold so much, it would have shown more wisdom had she put on one that would have afforded more protection to her neck and shoulders.

The dining-room was on a par as regarded size with all the other rooms in the house, and the small square table that was set in the middle of it looked like a little white island in a sea of red Turkey carpet.

As Sir Laurence led his sister to her place at the foot of the table, she paused before taking her seat and glanced in a deprecating manner at her niece.

"I hope you do not mind my sitting here, my dear Ethel," she said in a deprecating, hesitating voice. "I feel I have no right to do so, and you must, I am afraid, think me a dreadful interloper."

"Why, I don't care in the least where I sit, Aunt Isabel," Ethel answered cheerfully. "One place is every bit the same to me as another. In fact, as often as not I used to sit here at the side, so as to be closer to Uncle Laurence."

"You are a dear, good, sweet girl not to be jealous of me," said Mrs. Nugent, a look of very real relief crossing her face when she perceived with what perfect contentment Ethel had gone to the seat assigned to her. "I should have been too miserable if I had been the cause of making you unhappy. And the sweet way in which you have taken this proves to me, what indeed I knew already, that you have a dear, lovable nature." I am more than ever sure now that we shall love one another dearly."

A contraction of her eyebrows, so slight as to be almost imperceptible, marked Ethel's reception of this speech of her aunt's. She detested gush, and any signs of it towards herself, at least from her schoolfellows, had always met

with a prompt and severe snubbing. To snub her aunt, however, was out of the question; to reply in the same strain equally so. Ethel was therefore silent, and Sir Laurence's genial voice broke the slight pause that followed his sister's speech.

"There, Isabel, what did I tell you?" he said triumphantly. "Ethel has not the least intention of feeling aggrieved because you naturally will now fill the place of mistress of my house—a post of honour which, had you not come to live with me, would equally, of course, have developed upon her. Indeed, I am afraid," he added, with a shake of his head, "it would have been only a nominal mistress that she would have made. She has her ambitions, I believe, but I do not think they lie in the direction of a desire to keep the keys of the store cupboard, give the orders for dinner, and to sit at the head of the table."

"They don't," Ethel owned, with a laugh; "but it is disgracefully humbugging on your part, Uncle Laurie, to pretend that you are sorry because they don't. What would you have done now if I had come back from school determined to be sulky and jealous because Aunt Isabel and Violet had come to live here? You would have been in a pretty hole, wouldn't you, and have led a dreadful life between us all, wouldn't you?"

Ethel's manner, which towards her aunt was marked by a certain degree of constraint and stiffness, altered completely as she entered into conversation with Sir Laurence. It was easy to see that she loved him very dearly, and that they were on the best possible terms

with one another. Almost unconsciously she edged her chair a few inches nearer to her uncle, and the two fell at once into eager talk connected with the farm. They could do so the more easily as Mrs. Nugent showed no desire to talk; and though now and again she threw in a remark or a question addressed to her niece, and to which Ethel replied politely but at no greater length than the occasion strictly required, she sat throughout the first part of dinner in an abstracted silence.

The soup, the fish, and the entrée had come and gone before Violet made her appearance; and then she rustled into the room with a flow of apologies on her lips.

"Oh, dear Uncle Laurence," she said, "can you forgive me for being so late? I really don't know how it is that I never, never can find time to be punctual like other people. Dear little Mumsie there will tell you that I am quite, quite hopeless in that respect. I suppose," with a sigh, "that it is my artistic temperament that stands in my way."

"Yes, I will forgive you, Violet," Sir Laurence said, with just a touch of gravity in his manner; while Ethel, glancing across the table at her cousin, wondered what an artistic temperament was, and why it should make its owner unpunctual. "But you must ask your mother to forgive you too."

"Oh, I know Mumsie will forgive me," Violet said carelessly, hardly troubling to glance at her mother as she spoke.

"Yes, dear, I will," Mrs. Nugent said hurriedly. Then

she added in a hesitating tone, "But I think, Violet dear, that you ought to try and be a little more punctual at meals. I do not think you have been down in time for one since we have been here."

It was evident, no less from the hesitating, nervous way in which Mrs. Nugent spoke, than from the look of surprise with which Violet listened, that Mrs. Nugent was not in the habit of finding fault, even in such a mild way, with her daughter.

"I am sure I haven't," Violet said, with an airy little laugh. "I don't think I could be in time for anything if I tried."

"There is an old saying, my dear Violet," Sir Laurence said, regarding his niece with the same kindly gravity that had marked his manner when accepting her apology, if such indeed it could be called, "'that one never knows what one can do until one tries.' So try and be punctual in future, for unpunctuality can become a very serious fault indeed."

"Oh, please don't be angry with me, Uncle Laurence," Violet began, putting on a little affected, beseeching air. Then perceiving that Sir Laurence still looked grave, she suddenly relapsed into a more natural manner, and assured him earnestly that it was not her fault that she was late. "It was Ruby's. She was so clumsy and slow, and all her fingers were thumbs."

"Don't you find her very awkward, too?" she asked, appealing to Ethel.

"Ruby does very little for me, but that little she

does well enough," Ethel said ; and the reflection that Violet spoke in different terms of Ruby's skill before her face to those she employed behind her back was responsible for the coldness with which she answered her cousin.

Ethel, in fact, was rapidly making up her mind that she did not like Violet. Violet's mannerisms, the stilted, affected way in which she spoke, the artificial ring in her voice, especially when she laughed, and a trick she had of drawling out the last two or three words of each sentence, aggravated Ethel considerably.

It was not possible for Sir Laurence to continue his account of his farming schemes after Violet had come to the table, for she interrupted him continually with questions and remarks that were not always strictly to the point. She had a way, too, of going off into little fits and shrieks of laughter over incidents that scarcely called for more than a smile ; and presently, when Sir Laurence asked Ethel if he had told her in any of his letters about Mrs. West and her donkey, Violet laughed so much and so loudly that Ethel had to content herself with a shake of the head by way of answer.

"It's a good tale," said Sir Laurence, "and as soon as Violet here has done laughing, I will tell it to you."

"Oh, I know it is going to be something funny," Violet gasped. "Tales about donkeys always are."

"Well, suppose you listen to it then, Miss Violet," Sir Laurence said good-humouredly, "and laugh afterwards. You are taking a leaf out of the Red Queen's book by laughing beforehand."

"The Red Queen! Who was the Red Queen?" Violet asked, with a fresh explosion of laughter. "Oh, you are so funny, Uncle Laurence!"

"The Red Queen. Is it possible that you have not read your 'Alice in Wonderland'?" Sir Laurence exclaimed in momentary surprise. "I shall make a point of getting the book out of the library to-morrow for you. But we are wandering from our donkey."

"Oh, Uncle Laurence, oh, oh, oh!" Violet screamed, in renewed paroxysms of laughter. "I shall positively die with laughter. I know I shall. Oh, I know it is going to be too funny for words!"

"It is a good tale," said Sir Laurence, "and it has the merit of being strictly true; but you have laughed so much beforehand, that I shall be surprised if you have a laugh left for the conclusion. Here it is. Mrs. West is a friend of mine, who lives in one of the cottages in the combe. Well, one day I found her puzzling over a bill that had just been sent in to her from a small farmer on the Torleigh road, who had been taking care of her donkey during part of the winter, and which read—

"'To Mrs. West, for hay, and corn, and et cetera, 12/6.'

"'Ay 'e eats, and corn 'e eats, but my donkey don't eat no et cetera, and never 'ave done,' said Mrs. West indignantly."

Ethel's laugh rang out as her uncle finished his anecdote. Mrs. West was well known to her, and she could appreciate the old woman's perplexity over the unknown

words; but her amusement was nothing, apparently, to Violet's, who was convulsed with laughter.

"Violet has such a keen sense of humour," said Mrs. Nugent, from whom the anecdote had scarcely drawn a smile. Though she had joined in the conversation now and again, it was obvious that her thoughts during the greater part of dinner, at any rate, had been very far away; and to judge by the expression of her face, they had not been altogether pleasant ones. It was the sound of Violet's laughter that had roused her from her abstraction, and her eyes brightened, and her look became happier, as she listened to it.

As soon as dinner was over, Ethel made her way into the garden. It was a warm, lovely night, the moon had risen, and there was a pathway of silver across the sea. Ethel announced her intention of taking a stroll along the cliffs, and Mrs. Nugent was horrified at the idea.

"At this hour of the night, and alone, my dear Ethel!" she exclaimed. "It is not safe; you might stumble, and be over the edge of the cliffs, and be drowned in a moment."

Ethel laughed. "Why, the moon is so bright that there is no danger of my doing that, Aunt Isabel," she said. "I often go out after dinner for a little while."

"Oh, I will come too," Violet exclaimed. "I should love a moonlight walk at the edge of the sea. It would be so delightfully romantic."

Mrs. Nugent entreated Violet not to do anything rash.

"I shall be nervous the whole time you are away," she said. "Do, dear Ethel, persuade her to stay in the house."

That Ethel, whose main idea in going out had been to escape for a while from the society of her aunt and Violet, was very ready to do; but Violet clung pertinaciously to her intention of accompanying her cousin, and Ethel could not, without actual rudeness, go without her. So, inwardly regretting that she had not quietly slipped away without a word to any one, she was obliged to wait while Violet, not without some difficulty and a great deal of talking, silenced her mother's objections. Then Ruby had to be summoned and dispatched for a wrap, because Mrs. Nugent would not hear of Violet venturing out into the night air with bare neck and shoulders. And the golf cape that Ruby brought not pleasing Violet, the girl was sent on a second journey for something else. By that time Ethel's patience was at an end, and calling out that she would wait at the bottom of the garden for Violet, she went on ahead. But she had hardly reached the veranda before she was joined by Violet, who wore a fleecy white shawl, thrown becomingly over her head, and wrapped round her shoulders. She went into positive ecstasies and raptures over the still, calm beauty of the scene that lay outspread before them. The moon threw a pathway of silvery light from the horizon to the edge of the little beach below them, where the tiny waves lapped, with a gentle murmur, on the fine gravel. Immediately under the cliff lay a mass of big red boulders, the outer ones worn smooth by the waves, but those close to the base of the cliff were as jagged and pointed as when they had become detached and had broken away from the rock above them.

Many an enjoyable scramble had Ethel had, in past days, over those rocks, and many more did she hope to have in the days that were to come. And while Violet talked on about the beauty and the silence of the night—which, Ethel thought to herself, had become rather less silent, in their neighbourhood at all events, since they had emerged from the house—Ethel, unheeding her, looked at the little tarpaulin boat-house that lay snugly built among the rocks, and beyond the reach even of the highest seas, and half regretted that she had not brought the key with her. A row at that hour would have been delightful, and she might have visited some of her favourite caves. However, she reflected, with a sigh of content, she would in future have plenty of time for all she wanted to do. Never again would she be tormented by the thought that her happy weeks at home were limited to a short seven at midsummer, a mean five at Christmas, and a hardly-worth-taking-into-consideration-three at Easter. She had endless weeks of pleasure before her, and her school days seemed to be already receding into the dim and distant past. Why, she could scarcely believe that only four-and-twenty hours ago she had been sitting in her bedroom with Ida. Nothing very much had happened since then, it was true, and yet those twenty-four hours formed a bridge that completely separated her old life from her new. Then her thoughts dwelt for a moment upon Ida, and she sighed—a sigh of regret this time—as she realized that the old days of intimate companionship with her friend were over. She might possibly go and stay with Ida, and Ida

would certainly come and stay with her, but their lives would run now in different lines. Never again would they actually share the same existence, or live in the same little world.

At that point Ethel became conscious that Violet's voice had ceased, and that her last sentence had ended with a note of interrogation.

"Or are they not for publication?" she had asked. "Your thoughts, I mean," Violet repeated, as Ethel turned to her with a look of inquiry. "You have not spoken a single word since we stopped here to look at the sea. What were you thinking about; for I am sure you were not listening to what I was saying?"

"No," said Ethel, with more frankness than politeness; "I wasn't. I was thinking," she added, "about a friend of mine called Ida Green."

"Oh, a school friend," said Violet. "Do you believe in girl friendships? I don't."

"Then I expect you don't know much about them," said Ethel, not argumentatively, but as if she were stating an obvious fact. "When you say that you don't believe in them, do you mean that girls are too fickle to care for each other long, or that their supposed friendship, even while it lasts, is not sincere?"

"Both," said Violet, with the little affected drawl that sometimes marked her speech. "Why, every one laughs at school-girl friendships."

"I shouldn't advise them to do so before Miss Longman, then," said Ethel. "They should hear what she has

to say on the subject; and as she has been head of a school for about thirty-five years, she has had time to know something about it. She has told me that she has known many friendships that were formed at school last all through life."

"And you think that you and Ida Green will always be friends?" Violet asked after a pause.

"I am quite sure of it," Ethel answered with conviction.

"It must be very nice to have a friend of that sort," Violet said, rather wistfully. "Tell me what she is like. Is she pretty?"

"Very."

"And was it because she was pretty that you liked her?"

"No, one does not like people simply because they are pretty. One likes them for what they are," said Ethel sententiously.

"Was she clever?"

"At some things, very."

"Was it because she was clever, then, that you liked her?" Violet persisted.

"I don't know. No, I suppose not," Ethel answered reflectively.

"Then it must have been for her qualities that you liked her," Violet went on. "What were they? I should like to know. What kind of character would the girl that you choose for a friend be obliged to have?"

"Well," said Ethel thoughtfully, her mind dwelling

entirely upon her absent friend as she spoke, "she would have to be truthful, and straightforward, and generally above-board in every way. Those would be the principal things, of course. Fond of fun, too, and oh, a good sort in every way."

"And Ida was all that?"

"Rather, and more. But it can't really interest you to hear me talk about Ida, for, you see, you don't know her."

"No, but I am interested in her because she was your friend," Violet said, glancing up at her tall cousin, who looked singularly pale and handsome in the moonlight, with an expression of admiration, not entirely unmingled with envy, in her own face; "and I think, you know, Ethel, that you would be frightfully hard to please."

"No," said Ethel, after considering a moment, "I don't think so. I was friendly with nearly everybody in the school, although Ida was my only really intimate friend."

"Was she good at games like you?" asked Violet. "Oh," as a look of surprise crossed Ethel's face, "Uncle Laurence was never tired of talking about you; and he has told us how well you do everything—how beautifully you swim, what a first-rate tennis player you are, how you have played hockey for the county, and how you always win the ladies' boat race, and that your cricket is as good as a boy's, and how well you ride and drive."

"That I am sure Uncle Laurence never told you," Ethel said, interrupting the list of her accomplishments. "He has the poorest possible opinion of my driving. He says I am far too reckless."

"Oh, well, perhaps I took that for granted, as you do everything else so well. It must be nice to be as clever as you are, Ethel; and the funny thing is, that you don't seem a bit conceited about it either. Now, if I had won all the prizes, for different things, that you have, I should always be letting people know about them, and expecting praise and admiration."

"No, you wouldn't," said Ethel. "If you were the least little bit good at anything, you would know what heaps and heaps of people there were who could knock your head off at it, if they wanted to. And so," she concluded with a laugh, "you would be as nice and modest about your prowess as I am. Come along the cliff to that point over there, and I'll show you a splendid rock to get bass from."

Ethel had purposely given a somewhat abrupt turn to the conversation, for she had an idea that Violet's expressions of admiration for her were not sincere. But as soon as she had reached the spot to which she had directed her steps, her cousin's flattering words passed from her mind.

Immediately below them stretched a range of low rocks left bare by the receding tide, and at the point farthest from the shore rose a big flat rock which was cut off, even at extreme low tide, from the others. And recollections of many pleasant hours passed there, angling for bass and pollock, occupied her attention, and she resolved to hunt up her rods and lines on the morrow, and try her luck there again at no very distant date.

"Tom Anstruther made the biggest catch of the season on that rock last summer," she observed, more to herself than to her companion. "Fourteen bass and nineteen pollock in less than two hours, I think it was. I must see if I can't beat his record this summer."

"Tom Anstruther, who is he?" asked Violet.

"Oh, the Anstruthers are our nearest neighbours; they are great friends of ours."

"What does the family consist of?"

"One girl and three boys—Nora, Tom, Godfrey, and Harold. Tom is at Oxford, Godfrey is a medical student, and Harold is still at school."

"And is Nora older or younger than you?"

"About a year younger, I think. She is not very strong, and has always had a governess at home, instead of going to school. I hope the boys are at home. If they are, we'll have some tennis to-morrow."

"And is Nora as great a friend of yours as Ida?" asked Violet, for whom the subject of Ethel's friendships seemed to possess a curious fascination.

"We are very good friends," Ethel answered with a little yawn. She was becoming tired of the numberless questions which Violet had asked her that evening. "What do you say to going in now? Uncle Laurence will have finished his cigar, and be ready for a game of some sort, or for a talk."

"You are not very polite to mother and me," said Violet, who was obliged to quicken her pace considerably to keep up with Ethel's long, swinging stride.

"You come out until Uncle Laurence is ready to give us his society, and then only you return to the house."

"I did not mean to be rude either to your mother or to you," Ethel said with simple directness.

"I was only joking," Violet drawled out, "so please don't snap me up so quickly. Far be it from me to accuse such a paragon of perfection as yourself of any fault whatsoever. I would not dream of taking such a liberty."

To that speech Ethel vouchsafed no reply. Though the words might have been meant only as good-natured chaff, the somewhat disagreeable tone in which they were uttered, no less than the mocking laugh that accompanied them, prevented them from being taken as such.

"Do you never get tired?" Violet asked presently, as they neared the house. She herself was panting and almost breathless from the rapid rate at which they had walked.

"Hardly ever," Ethel answered, totally unconscious of the sarcastic meaning that had underlain her cousin's query. "I am tremendously strong."

Violet went to bed, or at any rate up to her own room, very soon after she and her cousin reached the house; and as Sir Laurence was writing letters in his study, Ethel found herself alone in the drawing-room with her aunt.

Mrs. Nugent was dozing quietly in a big armchair by the fire, and Ethel, made sleepy by the warm atmos-

phere of the room, was about to make her escape into the hall, when Mrs. Nugent suddenly stirred and woke.

"Ah, Ethel dearest, is that you?" she said. "And where is Violet? Did you have a nice long talk in the garden, and what was it all about?"

"I don't think either of us said anything interesting, Aunt Isabel," Ethel said, after a moment's consideration. "Violet asked me questions about one of my friends, and I answered her, and I think that was all."

"And then you questioned her about her friends, I suppose?" Mrs. Nugent said with a smile.

"No," said Ethel, conscious that she had felt no curiosity on that subject whatever; "I didn't."

"Ah, well, you will another day," said Mrs. Nugent. "And now, dearest Ethel, tell me what you think of my sweet Violet."

"I think it is an awful pity that she is so affected," was Ethel's swift, uncompromising reply.

For a moment Mrs. Nugent was too startled to reply.

"My dear Ethel!" she said then; and again, after another pause, "my dear Ethel!"

Chapter IV.

VIOLET NUGENT'S CHILDHOOD.

ABOUT ten o'clock that same evening Violet sat before her dressing-table, and, with her elbows planted upon it and her face pressed close to the glass, attentively studied her reflection. In a slow, scrutinizing manner she gazed at each feature in turn, and then drawing back, contemplated the general effect of her appearance from a little distance.

A look of uncertainty, almost of anxiety, rested on her face for a few minutes; it gradually cleared away, she smiled, and a sudden expression of triumph replaced the doubt and discontent that had been there before.

"Yes, I am prettier than she is," she murmured, watching the movement of her lips as they displayed her even, white teeth; "much prettier. My eyes are better than hers, and I believe my eyelashes are longer. My nose is every bit as straight as hers, and my mouth is smaller. Her hair may be thick and long—I dare say it is; and she curls it very nicely—I will say that for her. By the way, I wonder whether she does it with tongs or curling-pins; I must find out. But that sort of brownny hair is very common, not half as nice as mine. No, I don't like her;

I knew somehow I shouldn't. And I really don't see why she should be so dreadfully conceited. No," pausing for a moment and giving her head a slight shake. The movement, as she caught sight of it in the glass, seemed to her rather effective, and she repeated it before continuing her train of cogitation. "No," she resumed, when she had satisfied herself that the shake was now thoroughly acquired and could be brought into future use; "conceited is not the right word. She is too self-satisfied to be conceited. That is to say," striving to make her meaning quite clear to herself, "she is so thoroughly contented with herself that she does not mind in the very least what other people think of her."

Had Violet only known how entirely true that stricture was, she would have paused to plume herself on her acumen; but as it was only one out of many sweeping accusations that she was thus mentally bringing against her cousin, she did not stop to give it especial consideration, but went on to reflect that, besides being tolerably well pleased with herself, Ethel was not in any sort of way equal to her—Violet.

"She has a way of sticking her chin up in the air when she is in a scornful mood and of raising her eyebrows and lowering her lids that rather suits her. She looked like that when I asked her if it wasn't much better to be polite than to be truthful, and the expression suited her splendidly."

As she murmured the last words—for Violet was still, according to a custom of hers when facing the glass,

uttering her thoughts aloud—a sudden idea seemed to strike her, and taking her elbows off the dressing-table, she opened one of the drawers in it, and after searching among its untidy contents for several moments, drew out a piece of paper and a pencil. Then, with down-bent head and brows drawn into a thoughtful frown, she began a sketch of Ethel's head.

As she worked the whole character of her face altered. The empty look of rather supercilious vanity that it usually wore seemed to fall away from it as if by magic, and an earnest, rapt expression took its place.

A few rapid strokes, and the sketch—a striking likeness of Ethel with the proud, rather disdainful look that her features had worn at the moment which Violet's train of thought had brought back to her mind—lay on the table.

It was an excellent piece of work, and Violet contemplated it with a perfectly justifiable feeling of satisfaction at her own skill. But as she looked at it a spasm of jealousy crossed her face, and hastily bending over the sketch again she accentuated the proud lines of the mouth until it wore a most unbecoming and disagreeable sneer. But then the drawing no longer represented Ethel—or at least was merely a bad caricature of her—and perceiving what she had done, Violet tore the paper into little bits and scattered them on the floor.

"I can't draw," she said hopelessly. "I could do better two years ago than I can now. Somehow the knack seems to have left me. And I am really only

happy when I am drawing. I do think that I am dreadfully to be pitied."

At any rate Violet pitied herself sincerely. She devoted some minutes to the luxury of self-pity, and then quite suddenly her conscience made itself heard. It reproached her for having wilfully neglected to cultivate the talent that was hers; and little as Violet Nugent liked to face the truth, and seldom as she did so, it was borne in upon her with crushing, overwhelming force that she had only her own indolence to blame if she had of late made no advance in the art to which she had once resolved to devote herself seriously.

Two faults, those of vanity and jealousy, were at the root of most of the undesirable qualities in Violet's nature. And the way in which she had been brought up would have been sufficient to spoil a child with a better balanced mind than Violet possessed. Her father and mother, especially the former, had fairly idolized her, and during his lifetime he had indulged and spoiled her in every way. From her babyhood up, Violet had been an exceedingly pretty and taking child, and with the injudiciousness which is often shown towards pretty little girls, Mrs. Nugent's friends praised her pretty little daughter to the latter's gravely attentive face, and it would have been hard to say whether mother or child derived the most pleasure from the flattery. But to the child at least it had done great harm. Before she could speak quite plainly Violet began to give much thought to her personal appearance, and when she was brought

down from the nursery to be shown to her mother's friends she grew quite sulky and cross if she did not happen to meet with what she considered her due meed of praise and admiration.

Up to within a few months of his death Mr. Nugent had been a very wealthy man; but unfortunate speculations proved his ruin, and he died just before the crash came, leaving his wife and two children with an income which, though a mere nothing compared to the one they had previously enjoyed, was yet sufficient for them to live upon. Wilfrid was sixteen at the time of his father's death, while Violet was barely fifteen. Fortunately for Mrs. Nugent, who knew nothing of business, and who, prostrate with grief at the loss of her husband, was even less capable than she would have been at any other time of dealing with the simplest question that might arise, Mr. Thomas Nugent, her husband's only brother, was in Montreal. Mr. Thomas Nugent was a solicitor with a large and lucrative practice in London; and though he was not perhaps as wealthy as his brother in his prosperous days had been, he was yet an exceedingly well-to-do man, and one, moreover, of high standing in his profession. He had come over to Montreal with the purpose of endeavouring to help his brother in his financial crisis. But his utmost efforts had been powerless to stave off the inevitable end, and when his brother, whose heart had never been strong, died literally from the shock of knowing that he was practically a ruined man, Mr. Nugent took the conduct of his sister-in-law's

affairs into his own hands, and arranged everything in a business-like, methodical way. It was he who disposed of the remainder of the lease of the big fashionable house, and who, after choosing one more suited to their straitened means, installed his sister-in-law in it and sold off the surplus furniture. Then he took the future of his nephew and niece into his consideration.

"I will give Wilfrid a place in my office," he said. "Mind there will be no favour shown to him because he is my nephew; he must begin at the bottom and show me the stuff he is made of, and then—well, perhaps we shall see."

Mrs. Nugent, rendered apathetic by grief, raised no objection to the plan, but she did not attempt to conceal the dismay she felt at the prospect of her only son—her cherished Wilfrid—becoming a mere clerk, with a salary of thirty shillings a week. Once upon a time it was a very different future that had been mapped out for him. He was to have gone that autumn either to Oxford or Cambridge, and then to have made choice of a profession. And though it was out of the question that Mrs. Nugent could send him to the university now, she secretly expected that his uncle, who, though married, was a childless man, would have undertaken to defray his expenses there. Some foundation for the hope had been given her by the fact that her brother-in-law had made rather a point of seeing a good deal of Wilfrid during his short stay. That Mr. Thomas Nugent had been carefully sounding the boy with a view to dis-

covering his tastes and habits, and that he had come to the conclusion that the lad, though a good one in the main, was of a thoroughly idle disposition, without the smallest notion of the value of money, and whose principal aim since he left school—where Mr. Nugent incidentally discovered he had earned the reputation of being the laziest boy in it—had been to kill time, would not have afforded much comfort to Mrs. Nugent, especially as the result of his investigations had been to convince him that a university education would be utterly thrown away upon the boy.

Mrs. Nugent shed many tears over the altered prospects of her boy's life, and openly bewailed to him the meanness of his uncle in not offering to send him to college first, and to embark him on a profession afterwards.

"Oh, come, mother dear," Wilfrid said, flushing up to the roots of his fair hair. "Uncle Tom needn't have done anything at all for me, as far as that goes; and many penniless young fellows like myself would think themselves jolly lucky to get my start. And I mean to work like a nigger and rise to the top of the tree and make no end of money, so that you may drive in your own carriage again some day."

Despite his faults Wilfrid possessed a sunny, sanguine temperament that led him always to look on the hopeful side of things, and to make the best of them. One of the worst defects in his nature was that he was exceedingly easily led, and that he seemed to take the whole tone of his nature from the person who for the time

being influenced him. But just then he was under the influence of his uncle, whose energy and love of work dominated the lad for good, and made him determined to do all that lay in his power to give satisfaction to his employer.

If he was not blind to Wilfrid's faults, Mr. Nugent saw those of his niece very clearly indeed. For Violet's, too, lay chiefly on the surface, and hid the good qualities that were latent in her from the perception of those who did not know her very well indeed. And though grief for her father had caused Violet to lay aside all her little affectations and to forget her silly vanity, yet Mr. Nugent could not but recognize how grave the faults of her upbringing had been, and what an unfortunate effect they had had upon her character. And what increased the pity of it all, in his opinion, was the fact that Violet was a clever girl. She had a quick intelligence, good brain power, and last, but by no means least, artistic talents of no mean order. And yet—for Mr. Nugent brought the same careful thought to bear on his niece's character as he had done upon his nephew's—he soon saw that Violet was prouder far of her looks and general appearance than she was of the mental gifts which nature had bestowed on her, and that hours which ought to have been spent in study or in cultivating her undoubted talent for drawing were passed before the looking-glass. But he shrank from increasing his sister-in-law's grief by laying too much stress upon the injudicious way in which she had brought up her children. He did, how-

ever, strongly urge her to give Violet a good art education ; and as in so doing he let her perceive how highly he thought of Violet's talents, Mrs. Nugent listened well pleased, and said she would do her best to follow his advice.

So Wilfrid sailed for England with his uncle, and Mrs. Nugent and Violet were left behind in Montreal. Mrs. Nugent's love for her husband had been of an absorbing kind ; her somewhat weak and pliable nature had leaned on his stronger one all through their married life, and she seemed now unable to make up her mind even about the veriest trifle without his aid. And at first, at all events, she accepted her narrowed income, and all the countless privations it entailed, with an equanimity bordering on indifference ; and it was not until Violet, recovering after a while from the stunning effects of the blow that had fallen upon them, began to murmur at their poverty and at the loss of their old home and their pleasant circle of friends, that Mrs. Nugent awoke also to the fact that many cherished schemes for her daughter's future were now at an end. She had hoped to bring Violet to London to present her at court, and to give her a season in town. But, of course, all that was out of the question now. And though Mrs. Nugent had many friends who were glad to drive even out to the remote, unfashionable suburb in which she had taken refuge, it must be confessed that Violet had few. Her airs and graces and her many little affectations had prevented really nice girls of her own age from wishing to know her, and those who had been friendly with her merely for the sake of receiving invi-

tations to the sumptuous parties and entertainments which Mr. Nugent had constantly given for his daughter's amusement, were not the sort of friends to seek her out now that they had nothing more to gain from her.

It was hardly to be wondered at therefore, her upbringing considered, that, deprived at one stroke of all that she had liked best in life, Violet should become embittered and discontented. Nevertheless, she took her uncle's advice, and worked, by fits and starts it is true, but still with what at times was almost feverish energy, at her drawing. She attended an art school in the town, and made, on the whole, great progress, fully justifying the opinion that her uncle had formed of her abilities.

But her slumbering discontent was easily roused, and if she heard, as she sometimes did by chance or through the columns of a local paper, of any great social function at which her former acquaintances had been present, a bitter feeling of envy was sure to rise up in her as she contrasted their lot with her own, and for days she would be too miserable to go on with her work.

"Ah, Miss Nugent," one of her teachers said to her one day, "you have plenty of talent, your abilities are of a very high order, and if only your heart were in your work you would make a name for yourself one day."

And his words were borne out by a French artist of European renown, who, visiting the studio one day, not only conferred upon Violet the signal honour of pausing by her easel for a few minutes, but even grunted out a few words in high praise of her work.

"You ought to go far, young lady," he said, in his own language. "Be diligent, and we shall hear of you on the other side of the water some day."

There was not one among the students who would not have given much to have had those words addressed to himself or to herself, and Violet was esteemed a fortunate girl indeed. For the next few days she felt as if she were treading on air, and her head was full of dreams of the time when Europe should ring with her name.

"And yet with it all," exclaimed a student, whose frank admiration of Violet's cleverness made the latter forgive her equally frank strictures on her laziness—"and yet with it all you will not work. Your gifts are thrown away on you. They should have been bestowed upon a hard-working person like me, who would have known how to make use of them."

Violet smiled in a superior manner. A girl who had just received such flattering notice from a great man could afford to ignore the criticisms of a mere fellow student, and one, moreover, whose work had not gained even a passing notice.

"Wait till Europe rings with my name," she said, with more gaiety than she usually showed, "and then you will be proud of having worked in the same studio with me."

"Europe will never ring with your name unless you work more earnestly," said the girl, whose name was Angela Forbes. She was Scotch, and devoted to her art. "If I had had half your almost uncanny skill in

catching a likeness, Miss Nugent, I would have made three times the progress that you have made during the last year."

Violet hardly heeded her. During the next few weeks she felt as if she were treading on air; and with her head full of dreams of the rapidly approaching time when she should be famous, she worked hard, and was so bright and cheerful at home that Mrs. Nugent hoped she was ceasing to regret their poverty. But Violet's contented, buoyant frame of mind was a short-lived one, for it had not lasted very long before an account of the coming-out ball of a former acquaintance aroused jealous pangs in her, and her newly-awakened ambition was quenched in one of her periodical fits of discontent with her present lot.

Two years passed away in that manner. Mrs. Nugent led a quiet life, rarely going out anywhere, and with Violet for her sole interest. That she thoroughly believed in her daughter's talent and in her future success went without saying. When Violet was a precocious child Mrs. Nugent had laughed at and repeated her remarks as if they had been witty utterances; as she grew up into a decidedly good-looking girl, her mother impressed upon her that she was a beauty; and now that all prospect of launching her into society was gone, Mrs. Nugent took refuge in the conviction that, if her daughter would not have the opportunity of taking the world by storm through her looks, she would do so through the power of her genius. So Mrs. Nugent carefully treasured up every sketch and study

that Violet made, and was never weary of showing them to her friends, and prophesying Violet's ultimate fame.

When Violet was too moody or too idle to go to the studio, Mrs. Nugent told her that she was wise not to exert herself, and petted her and coddled her at home. And when Violet, after a spell of hard work, became dissatisfied with the result of her labours—a most satisfactory frame of mind, had her mother only known it, for her to be in—Mrs. Nugent exhausted herself in praise of the despised studies.

In short, everything that Violet did was right and good in her eyes, and Mrs. Nugent firmly believed that her daughter was destined to become one of the first portrait painters of her day.

As the third winter since her husband's death approached, Mrs. Nugent's health, which had been failing for some time past, became gradually worse. She had never been a very strong woman, and had been subject all her life to attacks of neuralgia, which sometimes left her prostrate for days. She called her ailment neuralgia now, but the doctor looked grave and spoke of some internal complaint. But without an examination he could not make sure, and Mrs. Nugent, frightened at the mere mention of the disease he named, would not consent to one. Then he spoke of a change to a warmer climate being advisable, and recommended a visit to the South of France or to Italy. Violet hailed the idea of a change with delight; and as the lease of their house, which they took by the year, was just up, there was nothing to detain them in Montreal. They went

first to London, and took lodgings in Bayswater for a month. Wilfrid gave up his own rooms for that time and stayed with them, going, after the first week, daily to and fro to the office. He was older and graver, but otherwise little changed from the mere boy he had been two years previously. But though he still kept his shoulder manfully to the wheel, Violet noticed that when their mother sighed over her poverty he no longer cried out, as he had been wont to do, that he would yet make another fortune in place of the one she had lost. Mrs. Nugent shed a good many tears over him, and, with the injudiciousness that characterized her, complained bitterly that her brother-in-law had not seen fit to make any difference between his own nephew and the other clerks.

"He ought to have taken you into partnership by this time," she said indignantly. "I am sure the business would be all the better for having a little youth and energy infused into it."

"Uncle Tom supplies all the necessary energy himself," said Wilfrid, with a laugh. "And youth is at a discount in the city. Besides, clerks don't become full-blown solicitors as easily as all that, mother dear. There is a tremendous lot of difference between a clerk and a solicitor."

"Your uncle could take you into partnership with him if he chose," repeated Mrs. Nugent, refusing to see the difference even when it was explained to her. "I am sure if your poor father had known that his only son would have to be a clerk on thirty shillings a week, he would have been terribly grieved."

After having, quite unintentionally, of course, done her best to make her son discontented with his lot, Mrs. Nugent, accompanied by Violet, went to Rome, and established herself there in a cheap but fairly comfortable pension. Violet attended a studio, and sketched in the galleries, and for a time at least she was perfectly happy. The artist whose studio she attended thought highly of her abilities; her fellow students, among whom she was the only English girl, made much of her; and in that congenial atmosphere of praise and appreciation Violet made considerable progress. But when the spring came Mrs. and Miss Nugent were perforce obliged to leave Rome, and as they journeyed rather aimlessly from one mountain resort to another Violet lost both opportunity and incentive to work. And gradually even her mother, most partial of critics though she was, could no longer blind herself to the fact that their present mode of existence was not improving Violet's character. Going from pension to pension, living perpetually in public—for Mrs. Nugent's means did not allow of her engaging a private sitting-room—and meeting all sorts and conditions of people, was not a good life for a girl of seventeen. Under its influence Violet was becoming gossipy and idle, and was always seeking for distraction. Once, when her mother spoke of returning to Rome for the winter, she declared vehemently that she would much rather go to Nice or Mentone, where some of her new acquaintances told her people were sociable and nice, and where they gave dances and private theatricals in the pensions, and got up parties for picnics and excursions.

"But what about your painting, dear?" Mrs. Nugent ventured timidly.

"Oh, I am sick of it," was the impatient reply. "I want to enjoy myself now like other girls. Why should I be cooped up all day from morning to night, when I might be having a good time somewhere else?"

"I like you to have a good time, you know that, dear," Mrs. Nugent said gently. "Go out now and enjoy yourself."

But she sighed a little, nevertheless, and grew unwontedly thoughtful when a few minutes later, watching from an upper window, she saw Violet, her good humour quite restored, starting out for a day's excursion with some people who were staying in the pension. These were a Major and Mrs. Brooke-Johnson and a Miss Bates, the latter's sister; and though there was, as far as Mrs. Nugent could see, no actual harm in them, they were not the sort of people with whom she cared to see her daughter associate. Major Brooke-Johnson was a quiet man enough; but his wife and sister-in-law were very noisy in their talk and laughter, and really seemed pleased when, either in the street or at table-d'hôte, they could attract attention to themselves.

"This life of perpetual excitement is bad for my darling," Mrs. Nugent murmured to herself, as she turned from the window with an unusually thoughtful expression on her face. "She is so much sought after that she never has any time to herself. It is natural, of course, that every one should want to be in her society as much as possible, but it is bad for her. This unsettled, vagrant

mode of life would be bad for any girl of seventeen. Ah, if we only had money enough to settle in some nice English home!"

Thereupon Mrs. Nugent fell into a train of musing, in the course of which her mind revolved a plan which had presented itself to her more than once during the past few months. Her own life was precarious—how precarious she alone knew; at her death Violet would be left practically alone in the world. Her brother-in-law, Thomas Nugent, did not, Mrs. Nugent instinctively felt, like her daughter; if, therefore, she were left in his care he would prove, though an honest and trustworthy guardian, a stern, perhaps an unkind one. And dear Violet, so ran Mrs. Nugent's thoughts, must have the sunshine of love to bask in; otherwise the best impulses of her nature would shrivel up and die. And so Mrs. Nugent's thoughts turned towards her own half-brother, Sir Laurence Dunmayne. She had not seen him for many, many years; neither had they ever corresponded. It was even doubtful if he knew of her husband's death. Yet Mrs. Nugent felt sure that if she were to write and tell him of it, and ask him at the same time to befriend her daughter in the event of her own death, he would do so.

Her conviction was more than justified. Sir Laurence was shocked to learn from his sister's letter of the comparative poverty in which she had been living during the past few years, and he wrote instantly, offering both her and her daughter a home with him and his niece in Devonshire. It was an offer that Mrs. Nugent was delighted to accept,

although she qualified her acceptance by saying that they would call her sojourn in his house a visit. "A long visit, if you will, dear Laurence," she wrote. "But I should not like you to regret your generous offer of a home afterwards, and yet feel that you were not able to tell us to go." Sir Laurence was content to let the question as to the duration of their visit stand in abeyance. He replied that he would be glad to have her and his niece Violet on any terms, and that it was more than kind of them to be willing to put up with a quiet, country life. He added that his other niece, Ethel, would be delighted to hear that she was to have a cousin of her own age as a companion.

It was not until Mrs. Nugent had received his second letter that she broached to Violet the fact that she had been in communication with her step-brother. She opened the subject a little nervously, for she was more than doubtful as to how her daughter would take the news. Somewhat to her surprise, and greatly to her relief, Violet was delighted at the prospect of going to live with her uncle, and raised no objection at all to the plan.

And so, within a fortnight of the day when Mrs. Nugent had, with some disquietude of mind, watched her daughter drive off with a noisy party from the door of the pension, she and Violet had arrived in London from the Continent, and taken the train down from Paddington to Torleigh.

Sir Laurence met them at the station, and his cordial greeting, no less than the well-appointed carriage that awaited them, caused Violet to be glad indeed that she

had raised no obstacle to prevent her mother from accepting her step-brother's invitation.

"I was meant to have nice things round me, mother dear," she observed, with satisfaction, that evening when she and her mother had retired to the two large luxuriously furnished rooms facing south, and communicating with each other, that Sir Laurence had placed at their disposal.

Mrs. Nugent sighed a little wistfully. "These past three years have been very hard ones for you, my darling, I am afraid," she said. "And you have been so good and brave throughout them all."

"Yes, they have been bad ones for me," said Violet, so full of self-pity that it really never occurred to her that they had contained at least as much hardship for her mother. "Very few girls of my age—brought up as I was, I mean, of course—have had to put up with so much. When I think of the very different life I would have led if we hadn't lost all our money it makes me quite miserable."

"Then don't think of it, my darling," her mother returned tenderly. "Here, at any rate, you will be comfortable and happy. Yet it was not for the sake of being asked here now that I wrote; it was to gain a friend for you after my death. And my mind is more at ease about you now, my darling, than it has been for many months past; for I know that, whatever happens to me, your uncle will be good to you."

"Nothing is going to happen to you, dear," Violet an-

swered affectionately, but yet with a certain carelessness in her tone. Though Mrs. Nugent had now and again referred in somewhat desponding tones to the state of her health since she had left Canada, yet Violet, from whom the grave views that the doctor had entertained regarding her mother had been kept secret, remained in ignorance that there was anything really the matter with her. And as it was not Mrs. Nugent's intention to enlighten her daughter, she merely smiled rather faintly and changed the subject.

But if Violet delighted in the many little luxuries by which she found herself surrounded, Mrs. Nugent was not behind her in appreciation of them. The large, comfortably-furnished house, the well-cooked meals, the perfectly-appointed table, the well-trained servants—all formed a strong contrast both to the tiny little house to which they had moved in Montreal, and to the crowded, cheap Italian pensions in which they had lived during the last year. And when to it all was added the sense that they were at home, it was small wonder that Mrs. Nugent, at all events, felt that she did not care ever to move away.

"What you must have thought of me all these years for not coming to your assistance when you were left in such sad straits I cannot imagine," Sir Laurence said to his sister the next morning after breakfast, as they slowly paced the broad path along the cliff edge.

"Indeed, Laurence, I thought nothing bad of you," Mrs. Nugent returned. "Why, what possible claim

had I, a step-sister, whom you had scarcely seen, upon you?"

"No legal one perhaps, but a very strong moral one," returned Sir Laurence. "You ought to have written, Isabel, when poor—" He paused in some confusion. After all, he and his step-sister were such strangers that he actually did not know his brother-in-law's christian name.

"When your husband died," he added. "I would have come over to Canada, and brought you here then. Why, if a brother may not help a sister, who may?" he added, silencing the protestations she began to make. "It is one of the privileges of kinship."

"Thomas did not think it a privilege," she returned, reverting to her old grievance against her brother-in-law. "Nothing could have been more unsympathetic than his manner at the time of my terrible trial. Thomas," she added, perceiving that Sir Laurence was ignorant of whom she meant, "is my husband's brother."

"Ah, yes," said Sir Laurence. "Mr. Nugent is the solicitor who has taken your son into his employ, is he not?"

"Yes, and as a mere clerk," said Mrs. Nugent. "Considering that Wilfrid is his only nephew, he might have done more for him than to have made him his clerk. He might have taken him into partnership quite easily if he had chosen."

Sir Laurence could scarcely forbear smiling. But becoming speedily conscious that his step-sister's grievances on the score of Wilfrid were very real ones to her, he kept

a grave countenance, and listened attentively while she poured out the tale of her complaints against her brother-in-law—how he had thought Wilfrid inclined to be idle and lazy, and how he had even ventured to disapprove of the way in which Violet had been brought up.

Sir Laurence gathered that his step-sister, weak and yielding though she might be on all other points, could be like a tigress in defence of her two children. It was obvious that they were both perfect in her eyes, and that any one who threw a doubt upon their not being so in all respects incurred her deepest displeasure. Sir Laurence, at all events, saw nothing amiss with Violet. As Ethel had told Ida during the exchange of their last confidences as school-girls, he was always ready to accept people at their own valuation; and when his sister assured him that Violet was the dearest and sweetest girl in all the wide world, besides being the cleverest and the most beautiful, and when Violet talked and behaved as if for her part she fully endorsed her mother's opinion, Sir Laurence unhesitatingly accepted her at her own estimation, and never doubted that Ethel was an exceedingly lucky girl to have such a delightful cousin awaiting her return.

Though the courtesy and kindness which Sir Laurence manifested both towards Mrs. Nugent and her daughter could not have been surpassed, and though they had only to express a wish for him instantly to take steps to gratify it, Violet from the very first stood in considerable awe of him. She was annoyed to find that this was the case; but though she disguised the feeling under a half-flippant, half-

affected manner, it did not wear off. On the contrary, the more fully she realized what a good, noble nature Sir Laurence, in spite of his quiet, kindly manner, possessed, the deeper her awe of him became, and she had an uneasy consciousness that if he ever became aware of some of the more serious faults of her character, the high opinion that he at present entertained of her must infallibly be lowered. For Violet was well aware of her own faults. She knew that she was not always truthful, that she was prone to exaggeration, that she was inordinately vain of her personal appearance, and that envy and jealousy of people who were better looking or cleverer than herself was almost the dominant note in her character. Yet, though she fully recognized all this, she had not sufficient strength of mind or courage to set resolutely to work to cure herself of these grave faults.

And now, before she had been many hours in her uncle's house, she began to be jealous of her unknown cousin. Sir Laurence, secure in the belief that the two girls were going to be the best of friends, talked a good deal to Violet about Ethel; and from the many little anecdotes which he told concerning her, Violet was not slow to perceive that Ethel possessed many of the qualities which she, Violet, lacked. Thus, before Ethel arrived, Violet knew that she was a truthful, straightforward girl without any affectations, whose least action need not fear the clear light of day, and who was as intolerant of deceit in others as she was incapable of practising it herself. The photographs of her that were scattered about the drawing-room and

the hall told Violet that her cousin was pretty, the way in which the servants spoke of her proved that she was popular, and Violet felt certain beforehand that she would not like her cousin. An awkward, shy school-girl she could have patronized or ignored as she pleased; but a pretty, popular, lively cousin, whose clear gray eyes looked straight out of her photograph from under well-marked level brows, and whose mouth gave one the impression of being able to say scornful, impatient things, was not a cousin whom Violet felt she should ever like. And her forebodings were justified a few days later when, having dressed herself with great care in order that she might create a favourable impression on her cousin, she read nothing but amazement, impatience, and an unbounded scorn in Ethel's critical gray eyes.

Chapter V.

A SMALL CLOUD.

ETHEL was up very soon after sunrise the next morning, and with the key of the boat-house in her pocket, and her bathing dress, and a couple of towels slung over her shoulder, she made her way down to the cove.

The boat-house served as a bathing-machine, and a capital roomy one it made. She was ready in a very few minutes, and running down the sandy beach she entered the water and swam out to a raft that was moored about a hundred yards from the shore. After resting there a few minutes and getting back her breath—for it was the first time she had been in the water that year, and she was a little out of practice—she climbed up the steps that were fixed to the broad end of the triangular raft, and dived from the top one. For nearly half an hour she played about in the vicinity of the raft, diving and jumping from it and swimming round it. She was an exceedingly good swimmer, and a very venturesome one into the bargain, and had it not been that she was under a promise to her uncle never to go beyond the raft unless a boat or another swimmer accompanied her, she would

have been far out in the bay by that time. But as there was no boat with her this morning she contented herself with the neighbourhood of the raft until she felt that she had been in the water long enough, and then she struck out for the beach.

As a little later, with a towel over her shoulders and her wet hair hanging down her back, she went singing up the garden path towards the house, Sir Laurence, wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat, a loose coat, and leather leggings, stepped out through the conservatory door. Ethel hailed his appearance with a shout of delight, and quickened her steps to a run.

"I see you are bound for the farm," she cried. "Hurrah! so am I. Come along, and we will have a nice time together."

"Hush, you bad girl! you must not talk so loud," said Sir Laurence. "Do you know that it is barely half-past five, and that every member of the household except our two selves is still asleep?"

"Dreadfully lazy of them," said Ethel. "Fancy wasting a lovely morning like this in bed! I have had such a glorious bathe, Uncle Laurence; but had I only known that you were up, you should have taken a boat and pulled out into the bay."

"Then I am very glad you did not know it," returned Sir Laurence, walking rather quickly away from the vicinity of the house; for though Ethel had lowered her voice in obedience to his remonstrance, it was still loud enough to wake Mrs. Nugent, whose window, which was

slightly open, was just overhead. "I have come to an age, my dear Ethel, when I do not care to begin the day with violent exercise. But I am glad you had a good bathe in spite of the fact that you were not able to get further than the raft. I daresay your cousin Violet will like a bathe later in the day. How do you like her, eh? But I suppose you two are firm friends already. Your aunt tells me that she is sure you and Violet are going to have a very great cousinly affection for one another."

Ethel laughed a little as she shook back the masses of her long wet hair. They were crossing the sloping field at the top of which the farm building stood, and the rays of the sun fell very pleasantly on her head and shoulders. She was amused at the idea that her uncle should suppose that she could already be a firm friend of a girl whom she had seen for the first time scarcely twelve hours ago.

"It would take you longer than that to become friends with a man, wouldn't it, Uncle Laurence?" she asked seriously.

"I suppose it would, my dear. I stand reproved," he said, smiling too. "But you don't know, Ethel, how glad I am for your sake that you will have a companion of your own age in the house. Now that you have left school for good, I am afraid that you would soon begin to miss all your school friends, and find it very dull with only your old uncle for company."

"As if I should ever feel dull with you, Uncle Laurence!" Ethel said indignantly, as she slipped her arm within his, and gave it an affectionate squeeze. "Besides, I have

always such heaps and heaps to do that I could not feel dull if I tried."

"Still it is always nicer to have some one to do things with than to do them alone," went on Sir Laurence. "And you and Violet will be able to share all your amusements together in future. By the way, Nora and Tom Anstruther were up here the other day inquiring when you would be back. Tom said something about a tennis tournament which he wanted you to go in for with him."

"Oh, it's the Torleigh one, I suppose," Ethel said rather absently; "we entered for it together last year." She was thinking more of the first part of her uncle's speech than of the second, and reflecting that, from what she had already seen of her cousin, it was exceedingly doubtful whether Violet would care to share many, if any, of her amusements.

But by that time they had reached the low stone wall that bounded the farm premises, and during the next two hours their full attention was absorbed by other matters.

This farm and all things pertaining to it were very dear to Sir Laurence's heart. He was an enthusiastic farmer and breeder of cattle; and though neither of those two occupations, when adopted by amateurs, are supposed to be very profitable, Sir Laurence did surprisingly well at both of them. For one thing, he was very fortunate in his manager, M'Gregor, a shrewd, red-haired Scotsman, as honest as the day, but obstinate, and apt to follow his own judgment rather than his master's if they came into

collision. But as over and over again M'Gregor's way had proved to be the right and his own the wrong, Sir Laurence usually contented himself with a slight grumble that he was not allowed to manage matters in his own way, and, after sarcastically observing that he would like to know which was master and which was man, would allow M'Gregor to do as he thought fit. And as Sir Laurence's pigs took prizes at every show, and his shorthorns and Kerry cows were renowned throughout the United Kingdom, he did not really consider that he had much ground for complaint against M'Gregor.

The manager met Sir Laurence and his niece as they entered the yard. He had been astir even earlier than his master, for one of the little black Kerry cows had had a calf during the night, and the tiny little creature was now lying beside its mother in one of the comfortable cow houses that opened into the bricked yard. M'Gregor exhibited them both with much pride, and then, according to his usual custom, accompanied his master on a tour round the premises. During this morning inspection Sir Laurence was supposed to give any orders that might be necessary, but Ethel, following a step or two behind and catching stray scraps of their conversation, thought that it would have been more correct to say that M'Gregor gave the orders, and that Sir Laurence's part was to acquiesce in them. If any farm could be called spick and span, this one deserved the appellation. Everything about it was smart and up to date; there were no half-ruined out-houses, no tumble-down thatched barns to give it an air

of picturesqueness, and in spite of its lovely surroundings and the several fine clumps of trees that grew near it, there were not wanting people who voted it hideous.

"Hideous, my dear lady!" Sir Laurence would exclaim when one of his visitors would denounce his cherished property. "Hideous! How can nice clean red tile and red brick buildings look ugly? Why, I challenge you to show me a better kept farm in England than mine!"

"Clean! oh yes, there is no denying that. But where is the picturesqueness that ought, by every tradition, to cling to a Devonshire farmhouse?"

"Gone with the dirt that clings to some of them too," Sir Laurence would answer with a twinkle in his eye.

It was popularly reported that Sir Laurence, in his zeal for cleanliness, caused his pigs and his cows to be bathed twice daily, and frequently brushed and combed also. But that, needless to say, was a calumny; although the assertion was, Sir Laurence was wont to say, a triumphant proof of the splendid condition in which his animals were kept.

Sir Laurence and M'Gregor came to a pause at length before a sty tenanted by a mighty black pig named Walter, who had during the last two years taken more prizes than any other pig throughout the length and breadth of England. He had won gold medals and silver medals, and been highly commended and specially mentioned a very great number of times. His sty, taking the fact that he was after all but a pig into consideration, was a model of cleanliness; and rising

leisurely—for his immense size precluded any haste in his movements—from a bed of fresh straw, he came forward grunting, and thrust his nose between the bars.

“There isn’t a pig in the whole world to touch him,” exclaimed M’Gregor, who, rarely betrayed into anything like enthusiasm, gave his admiration free run when he did allow it to rise to the surface; “and he’s going to take the gold cup at Exeter next week, I’m certain.”

At that point Ethel, who, fond though she was of the farm, found herself unable to appreciate, at what was evidently only their due, some of the prize animals it contained, wandered off to the stables.

Most of the horses were already out at work in the fields, and retracing her steps through the farm-yard, Ethel took a solitary stroll round it on her own account, and then made her way to the poultry-field, which lay at the back of the cottage in which the manager and his wife lived. The M’Gregors had no children, and Mrs. M’Gregor, who was Scotch, was an even greater stickler for tidiness than her husband; and her cottage, in its neat, orderly aspect, matched the rest of the farm.

Early though the hour was, the slate steps leading to the door had been freshly washed, the curtains were spotlessly white, and the windows shone with rubbing. Even the flowers in the garden and the creepers on the wall looked as if they had not been permitted to grow at will, but had been trained and clipped to suit Mrs. M’Gregor’s ideas of horticulture.

As neither Mr. nor Mrs. M’Gregor regretted the fact

that they were childless, they were scarcely to be pitied on that account; certainly their employer reaped a distinct benefit from the fact, for the love and care which would have been given to children was expended on the animals committed to their charge. Mrs. M'Gregor was a positive authority on the subject of poultry, which were relegated to her sole charge; and her fowls, her ducks, her geese, and her turkeys were one and all the envy and admiration of every farmer's wife who was privileged to see them. Disease and failure were popularly supposed to be unknown to her; and although, of course, she had at times to contend against both, the prizes her poultry took at exhibitions, and the prices her market fowls fetched, had earned her a name among poultry dealers.

Knowing that it was useless to expect to find Mrs. M'Gregor in the house at that hour, Ethel went past it to the poultry-yard, where, with the aid of a stolid, red-cheeked Devonshire lad, Mrs. M'Gregor was giving her feathered flock their breakfast. She was an active, alert-looking little woman with bright, beady black eyes and high-boned freckled cheeks. She greeted Ethel with a pleasant smile, but did not pause for a moment in her work—no light one—of seeing that fair play obtained among her charges. Her quick, watchful eyes darted hither and thither, and any bird who was inclined to play marauding tricks upon its companions was quickly hustled off into the field into which the yard opened.

"They are very like children," remarked Mrs. M'Gregor, as with a sharp "desist now," she warned the flock of

geese to keep to their own breakfast and leave that of the little prize bantams alone. "Just let them know that you don't mean to allow them to get the upper hand, and they will be as good as gold. Do you remember how strict I used to be with you, Miss Ethel, when you were a child?"

"I remember the lovely teas you used to give me now and again much better, Mrs. M'Gregor," Ethel answered, laughing. "The only thing that makes me really feel greedy is the thought of your teas. I used to tell the girls at school about them, and you should have seen the hungry gleam in their eyes. I forgot no little detail calculated to bring it there—the little table set out in the garden, the great bowl of Devonshire cream with its lovely crinkly yellow top, the strawberries, the home-made bread and butter and cake, and then the big jug of raw cream that was meant for the tea, but which I generally took with everything else too. The mere thought of it all has made me so hungry that I think I must stop and have breakfast with you, Mrs. M'Gregor."

"Then you are too late by half an hour or so," said Mrs. M'Gregor, flinging the last handful of corn far and wide, and turning the bowl upside down to convince the fowls who had not joined in the rush made by the wiser ones that it indeed was quite empty. "It's market day, Miss Ethel, and M'Gregor and I are off in the spring cart in less than ten minutes from now."

"Ethel, Ethel!" called her uncle at that moment. "Come along, my dear; it's time we were getting back to breakfast."

"Well, don't forget that I am coming to tea very soon, Mrs. M'Gregor," said Ethel as she left the yard; "and I rather believe your raspberries are ripe about this time, aren't they?"

"Very good, Miss Ethel. I'll pick you a rare dishful any day you like to come," returned the woman heartily, "and be pleased to see you."

"Dear, dear, how time slips away when I am up here," said Sir Laurence, glancing at his watch as he and Ethel crossed the first of the two fields that separated the farm from the grounds of Nutcombe House. "There is something 'unco uncanny' about it, as our friend M'Gregor would say. By the way, Ethel, after you left us and went exploring on your own account, we went to the paddock in which Red Head is shut up."

"Red Head!" began Ethel in a puzzled tone. "Oh yes, I remember; that is the name of the little Jersey bull you bought last Christmas. Oh, I wish I had seen him! I must, next time I go up."

"Well, I wanted to warn you to be careful to keep a gate between you," said Sir Laurence. "He has grown unaccountably savage during the last few weeks, and M'Gregor says that he made quite a nasty rush at him the other day. I shall give him the small field near the cliff edge to himself, and warn all your young friends to keep clear of it; though when you see what a very vicious-looking animal he has become, I don't think you will need to be warned twice."

The clock in the hall chimed a quarter to nine as

Ethel and Sir Laurence passed through it on their way upstairs to get ready for breakfast, and there were no signs of either Mrs. Nugent or Violet to be seen.

"Your aunt will probably breakfast in her own room," said Sir Laurence, "but Violet will have hers with us. I don't suppose it will be very long before she will emulate your active habits, Ethel, and be bathing and boating with you before breakfast."

"Indeed, uncle dear, I don't suppose I shall ever do anything of the sort," said Violet's voice at that moment, and Violet herself stood awaiting them at the turn of the stairs. "I am far, far too fond of my bed to care to leave it before it is absolutely necessary. Why, Ethel," she exclaimed, turning to her cousin, "where have you been? You look quite—"

"Disreputable," laughed Ethel, supplying the word which had evidently been in her cousin's mind, but which politeness had kept off her lips. "I expect I do."

And she did. Hatless, with her towel still over her shoulders, her hair, dry now, but sticky with salt water, tied back at the nape of her neck with a piece of string, a crumpled shirt, and a skirt covered with the little bits of straw and hay that had clung to it during her peregrination through various barns and hay lofts, she presented a marked contrast to her cousin, who, in a clean pink cotton dress, looked both pretty and neat.

Punctuality at meals was a point on which Sir Laurence was very particular; and though Violet had during her brief stay at Nutcombe been late for almost every meal,

and especially late for breakfast, the mild reproof that Sir Laurence had administered to her at dinner the previous evening had taken effect, and she had been careful to be in time this morning, and was already waiting in the dining-room before the gong had finished its summons. Ethel arrived there a second or two later; and although only a quarter of an hour had elapsed since she had met her cousin on the stairs, she had done wonders to herself, and now in a neat, tailor-made blue serge skirt that just reached to her ankles, and a pale blue cambric shirt, she scarcely looked the same girl. A vigorous brushing, too, had improved the appearance of her hair, and it was now coiled neatly at the back of her head. But a pang shot through Violet as her eyes rested on it, for she had made the discovery that Ethel's hair was naturally curly. Though it was slightly damp from her bathe, there were little ripples and waves in it which could not have been produced in its present state either by irons or by curling pins. And the conviction that Ethel's curls were due to nature alone filled Violet with secret jealousy, and although it did not destroy her appetite, it certainly spoilt the flavour of everything she ate.

Sir Laurence drank his coffee and ate his bacon and eggs in comparative silence. He had his letters to read, and when they were finished his *Western Morning News* claimed his attention. So the two girls were free to talk to one another without interruption. During the first part of the meal, however, Violet was too sulky at the

unexpected discovery she had made to say a word, and Ethel on her part was far too hungry to want to talk.

But quite suddenly Violet recovered the temper which her two companions were not even aware that she had lost. She had observed that Ethel's hands were not only at least two sizes larger than her own, but that they were not nearly so white either. So it was with perfectly restored good humour that she asked Ethel what they should do that morning.

Now before Ethel went to sleep the night before she had mapped out her day very clearly. The early morning bathe and the visit to the farm had been part of the arranged programme. Then after breakfast she had settled to give orders that the tennis court should be marked and rolled, after which she would go down to the Anstruthers and ask some of them up to play in the afternoon. Then she would drive into Torleigh and buy a new tennis racquet and some new balls; she felt sure that there were none in the house. From two—the Anstruthers always came nice and early—until half-past seven they would play tennis; and after dinner—for there would be a full moon—they might go for a row or even for a sail if Uncle Laurence would give his consent. But though Ethel had thus planned her day without any reference whatever to her cousin, the omission had been quite unconscious. She had taken it for granted somehow that Violet would be quite happy to go her own way. But there was no reason at all why Violet should not share in her doings if she liked, and she was about to say so, when Violet added,—

"It's a lovely warm day. What do you say if we take books and go and sit on the beach? I could lie for hours just listening to the murmur of the waves; or if you don't care about that, you can take some fancy work, and I will read to you."

For a moment Ethel was too astonished to speak. The mere thought of her doing such an extraordinary thing as listening to the murmur of the waves by the hour together, or, worse still, employing herself with fancy work on the beach, literally took away her breath.

As soon as she had recovered from her surprise she laughed a little, and declining Violet's proposals with a slight shake of her head, gave her in brief outline an account of the way in which she purposed spending the day.

"Oh, if you are going to drive into Torleigh, I should like to come too!" Violet exclaimed.

"Take her to see the Anstruthers too," put in Sir Laurence, who had overheard the latter part of the conversation. "If you both run down there now, you will be back by eleven, and then I will drive you both into Torleigh myself. You don't look as delighted as you should, Miss Ethel," he added, looking at her frankly disconsolate face with a slight smile.

"I know I shan't be allowed to drive if you come, Uncle Laurie," she said, "and I had been looking forward to taking Black Spider and Rob Roy into Torleigh at a rattling pace."

"I am quite sure of it," returned her uncle; "but I

can't allow you to take Black Spider and Rob Roy at a rattling pace anywhere. They have not long been in double harness, and have not got used to one another yet, so until they have no one but Bates or I will drive them. So, Miss Ethel, you may just spare yourself the trouble of coaxing and wheedling me to change my mind. I shall order the phaeton, then, for eleven sharp, and mind you do not keep me waiting."

"Oh, I shall be ready, uncle," cried Violet. "I do love your dear, darling horses. But how you can want to drive them, Ethel, I don't know; I should be frightened to death if I had to."

"Quiet old jog-trots," said Ethel, with a teasing glance at her uncle; "any one could drive them. Now the sort of horse I like to drive is a horse that one daren't take one's eyes off for a single moment—one that shies at motors, and bicycles, and bits of paper, and at everything that comes in its way."

"Then please leave me behind when you go out for a drive with such a horse as that," said Violet with a shudder. "I should simply die of fright—I know I should."

"Uncle Laurence," said Ethel suddenly, as her uncle gathered up his letters and papers, and prepared to get up from the table, "you know that I want three hunters at the very least this winter, don't you? Of course I can't ride poor old Jack any more. I should like a horse for driving, and a dog-cart of my own too; but I think I could do with three hunters to start with, at any rate."

"You are not modest in your wishes, Ethel," Sir Laurence said, with a slight gravity in his manner that surprised Violet, who thought that her cousin had merely been in fun, and that Sir Laurence would answer in the same spirit.

"No, I am not, perhaps; but there is no reason why I should be, is there? And I thought you might have got some in your eye for me already. Have you, Uncle Laurence?"

"No, dear, I have not," he answered. "But," as Ethel was about to speak, "we will go into this matter another time; but remember I cannot promise anything."

And with a parting injunction to both girls to be ready by the hour he had named he quitted the room, leaving Ethel sitting behind the urn with knitted brows deep in thought, and digging little holes in the tablecloth with the prongs of a fork.

"Come along," she said presently, jumping up rather suddenly, and letting the fork fall with a clang against the edge of her plate. "We haven't much time if we are to get down to the Anstruthers and be back here at eleven."

The Anstruthers lived in a pretty house only a few hundred yards away, as the crow flew, from Nutcombe House. By road the distance was at least three times as great, and as it involved ascending the steep lane that led to the highroad into the bargain, Violet readily acceded to Ethel's suggestion that they should take the short-cut over the cliffs. The promise of the early morning had

been fulfilled, and the day bid fair to be a gloriously fine one. Below them lay the sea, a dazzling sheet of blue, and twinkling with innumerable sparks of sunlight. The distant coast-line was veiled in a soft, tender haze—another sign of fair weather. The fleet of brown-sailed fishing boats that had come from the port of Fresham were just tacking out to sea, and their movements added life and interest to the scene.

The path that the two girls were pursuing was a narrow one, and lay, a mere strip of red earth, between the high hedge that bounded the fields on the landward side and the edge of the cliff. They were obliged, therefore, to walk in single file—a necessity which Ethel did not regret, for it gave her an opportunity to go over again in her own mind the brief conversation that had just taken place between her uncle and herself. Although, as she had once told Ida, the question of her inheritance was one that was rarely discussed by them, and then only, as she had begun to note, when introduced by herself, she knew that she was nevertheless the heiress of Aylewood, and that when she came of age, in rather less than three years' time, she would come into a very nice place, and four or five thousand pounds a year into the bargain. That being the case, she could not understand why she might not anticipate enough of her future riches as would buy her the three horses after which she hankered, and pay the wages of the extra servants that might be necessary to look after them. Yet she thought her uncle had looked, if not actually displeased, at least exceedingly grave, when

she had stated her wishes, and she was at a loss to understand why he should have been vexed at what was after all but a natural desire on her part. He knew that of all outdoor amusements she loved riding best, and that she had always purposed when she left school to go in seriously for hunting. It was not specially good in that part of the country, but still there were three packs of hounds within fairly easy reach of Nutcombe, and the experience that she would gain by going out with them would stand her in good stead when, as she hoped to do some day, she hunted in the Shires, and made a name for herself there. Could it be possible, she thought again, that her uncle had forgotten the fact that she would so soon have money of her own, and was under the impression that she had been asking him to provide those three horses for her himself? Absurd although at first the supposition seemed, it was the only one she could hit upon to account for the gravity of his manner, and she resolved at the first fitting opportunity to tell him of the mistake into which he had fallen. Having come to that decision, she turned round to see where Violet was, and perceived to her surprise that her cousin had lagged some little distance behind, and was actually limping.

"What is the matter?" she said, waiting, not without some impatience, for Violet to come up with her, and telling herself that she could have gone the whole way in about half the time that it had taken Violet to come a quarter. But a glance at her cousin's feet explained why she walked so badly. Her small patent leather shoes had not only the

very highest of high heels, but such pointed toes, that it was a wonder that Violet was able to walk anywhere but on smooth floors in them.

"And I am not sure," Ethel added candidly, after having given voice to this opinion, "that they are not too small for you as well. What on earth made you come out in these? You had better sit down here, and wait until I come back."

But Violet objected most decidedly to doing anything of the sort. She likewise protested that her shoes, far from being too small, were at least two sizes too big for her. And she glanced, not without secret satisfaction, at Ethel's feet, which, though narrow and well shaped, were, as was only fitting considering that she was half a head taller than her cousin, larger than her own. Twice one of Violet's shoes came off in the muddy bed of a little stream that trickled through the bottom of the ravine at the top of which the Anstruthers' house was situated, and once in jumping down from a stile she gave her ankle a nasty twist; but at length ground more suited to high-heeled French shoes than the soft yielding turf that clothed the summit of the cliffs was reached, and it was with a sigh of relief that, after following Ethel through a little iron gate that, bordered by high laurels, led to the head of the drive, she found herself at last on the steps of the house.

Ethel's entry was without ceremony. Taking a step or two into the house, she gave a peculiar whistle which was an exact imitation of a parrot that had once belonged to the Anstruthers, and whose perpetual call of "pretty Joey"

had been a signal between herself and them for many years. She had barely time to unpurse her lips after uttering the whistle, before several different ones came in answer from as many parts of the house; and "That you, Ethel!" "Hullo, there!" and "What ho!" were shouted in various youthful voices. Then there was a rush and scamper of feet, and just as a merry-looking schoolboy of fifteen came sliding at a dizzy rate of speed down the banisters, one of the doors leading off the hall was burst violently open, and out rushed three dogs, nearly twice as many cats, and tumbling over them all a tall, thin slip of a girl with a long pigtail hanging down her back, and a face so pale and delicate-looking that it would have been positively ethereal had it not been for the dancing mischievous light that sparkled and shone in her bright brown eyes.

"I got here first, Harold," she cried, precipitating herself with so much force upon Ethel that the latter reeled under the contact.

"Rubbish, Nora," retorted her brother, picking himself up from the middle of the floor, on to which the impetus of his slide, there being no knob at the bottom of the banisters to act as a buffer, had shot him. Years ago, when Tom, the wildest of all the Anstruthers, had been a schoolboy, he had sawn the knob level with the rails, and when remonstrated with by his mother had explained that the rate they were wont to come down caused the knob a painful thing to be brought up against, and that though cushions placed on it somewhat modified the hard knocks they received, they could

not be depended upon to keep in position. And though Tom had long since grown too old to slide down banisters, his youngest brother still profited by the fruits of his ingenuity.

Further argument between Nora and Tom as to which had arrived first in the hall was then cut short by the dogs, who, after walking suspiciously round Ethel, recognized her as an old acquaintance, and broke into a tumultuous chorus of barks and yelps, above which even Harold's lusty voice and Nora's shrill treble could not make themselves heard.

"Down, Julius Cæsar! Hannibal, shut up! Now then, Napoleon, out you go without any breakfast if you behave like that," cried Nora, cuffing the leaping, bounding animals with a show of vigour that was in reality the merest pretence. She would not have handled one of them roughly on any account. "You haven't seen Napoleon before, have you, Ethel?" she said suddenly, catching a big black dog round his neck and making him stand up for inspection. He was shaved in the manner of a poodle, and wore a silver collar to which a red bow was attached. "Isn't he a perfect darling?"

"But what sort of dog is he?" said Ethel, eyeing him doubtfully.

"You may well ask that," said Harold, with a burst of derisive laughter. "Nora calls him a poodle."

"And so he is a poodle," said Nora excitedly. "He may not be perfectly pure bred—"

"He may not indeed," interpolated Harold.

"But he is a poodle for all that. And you can't think how clever he is, Ethel. He knows, of course, that he has got to hate Nelson, and so he won't let him come near him, and always growls and flies at him when he does. And Nelson is such a peaceable old fellow that—"

"I should call him a coward myself," put in Harold.

"Peaceable, peaceable, peaceable," returned Nora, with a stamp of her foot. "That he does not understand why Napoleon should always be wanting to fight him, and so poor old Nelson tries to make friends with him. And then there are ructions, and—"

"There was one this morning at breakfast," said Harold, interrupting again. "Nelson evidently passed the time of day to Napoleon, and he construed it as an unfriendly act, and without waiting to send an ultimatum simply made for him. Nelson's peace tactics didn't allow him to wait for the onslaught, and with a whisk of his white tail he fled under the table. Napoleon was after him like a flash, but being in such a hurry he mistook the end of the tablecloth for Nelson's tail, and there was a tug and crash, and half the breakfast things, including the eggs, soft boiled ones, were on the floor, and the cats were fighting over the fish."

"Oh, how you exaggerate things!" said Nora indignantly. "Really, Harold, you are—"

But it seemed as if poor Nora were fated never to be able to bring a sentence to a conclusion, for at that point an angry snarl and a hiss was heard from the dining-room. During the discussion that had been taking place in the

hall the cats had gone back into the dining-room to finish the breakfasts to which they had just settled when Ethel and Violet arrived, and a sudden difference of opinion as to who was the rightful owner of the saucer that contained the most milk had suddenly risen, and Nora had to fly back to adjust the dispute.

"Oh, Nora with her old animals. Was there ever a girl like her!" said Harold. "Each time I come home the menagerie has grown bigger. Mother gets awfully mad with the whole collection sometimes, and says she will put them up to auction. But I tell her there wouldn't be a single bidder, so what would be the good. Now look at them," he added, as he and Ethel and Violet followed in Nora's wake. "Aren't they a disreputable crew? Did you ever see such a lot of scarecrows in your life?"

There were seven of them in all, and at the moment they were busily engaged in drinking from seven little dishes filled with milk, which were placed in a row on the polished boards just underneath the dining-room window. Nora's cats were all without exception stray, homeless cats, taken and cared for by her out of the love that she bore for all animals, and were called after the months of the year in which they had come to her. So far she had no duplicates. There was a December and a January, a February, an October, a March, an April, and a July, who was a ginger-haired cat, and the plainest of the seven. Not that any of them were beauties, and their mental or moral qualities would have had to be of a very high order indeed if they were to atone for their deficiencies in the matter of looks.

One had only one eye, one limped, one—though certainly not a Manx, which would have been some excuse for him—had no tail, there was a distinct suspicion of mange about three of them, not one of them could boast an entire pair of ears, and they were all lanky and lean in appearance.

“And yet you wouldn’t believe how much of what cook plaintively calls ‘good butcher’s meat’ they devour every day,” concluded Harold, when, with unsparing tongue, he had drawn attention to every single one of these points. “Upon my word, if I were Nora I would take the whole lot down to the sea and drown them.”

“Do you see his black eye?” cried Nora, suddenly swinging round and pointing to Harold’s face, which, sure enough, bore the marks of a fast disappearing bruise. “He got that a week ago when he saved July from a set of the Torleigh boys who were going to drown him off the pier.”

“But you bet that I didn’t know that July was going to surpass the rest of the months in sheer hideousness,” said Harold. “If I had, I would have left him to his fate.”

Nora merely smiled. She knew Harold better than that.

“Well, but all this time you two have been keeping up such an incessant chatter that I have not even had time to introduce my cousin to you,” said Ethel, with a rather tardy remembrance of what was due to Violet. “This, then, Violet, is Nora, and that is Harold, the youngest member of the Anstruther family, and—”

“And, as some people say, the nicest members of it,” put in Harold.

"I never heard any one except your two selves say it," returned Ethel, "and we all know how much self-praise is worth. Hullo, here is Tom!" she broke off, as a tall, fair-haired young fellow with the merry-looking brown Anstruther eyes strolled lazily, cigarette in hand, into the dining-room. "For shame, Tom!" she added, "is this your very first appearance?"

"My very first," he declared. "But you couldn't look more shocked if it were my last. I and the cats regularly breakfast together. We are congenial society. Well, and how are you? An emancipated young lady at last, eh? and thinking no end of yourself in consequence, I suppose?"

His flow of words—he seemed to share the family liking for the sound of his own voice—came to a sudden pause as his eyes fell upon Violet, and Ethel duly performed the ceremony of introduction. But Violet, greatly to Ethel's surprise—for she had set her cousin down as a most self-possessed young person—seemed to have been seized with a sudden fit of shyness since she entered the house. Nora made one or two attempts to draw her out by asking her if she liked tennis or boating or bicycling, but receiving a brief negative to each query, was not able to make much headway with her.

But the others amply atoned for her silence; and it was little short of marvellous, considering that never less than two, and sometimes three, of them spoke at once, and considering too that none of them were ever allowed by the others to finish a speech, how much news they managed to impart to one another.

Nora gave Ethel a full account of a mighty licking that Napoleon and Nelson, uniting for once, had administered to a retriever in the village who had objected to them simply watching him eat a bone, and how, merely as a lesson in good manners, and not out of greed, they had afterwards taken the bone from him; and how good Miss Morris—Miss Morris was the governess, then away for her holidays—had been to Hannibal when he got distemper, and how the vet. had said that it was she who had practically cured him, her nursing had been so splendid. Then Tom, who was cheerfully eating up the chilly remains of hot dishes before he tackled the things on the sideboard, struck in with one or two anecdotes of his doings during the last term, and allowed Ethel to get quite half-way through an account of the military tournament she was giving Harold before suddenly arresting her attention by announcing that he had put her name down for every event in the Torleigh tennis tournament, which was to be held in the grounds of the tennis club during the following week.

“I’ve entered our names together for the mixed doubles, knowing beforehand how delighted you would be at the chance of playing with me.”

“Then if I were you, Ethel, I just wouldn’t play with him. Conceited boy that he is!” cried Nora, hurling a cushion at her brother, who dodged it and allowed the missile to alight on the broad, fat back of the puppy Hannibal, who, taken by surprise, ran with a yelp straight into January’s saucer of milk, getting in consequence a warm reception from its owner.

"Then, Ethel," pursued Tom, who was now prowling round the sideboard, "I put down your name for the ladies' double handicap with Nora—your play and her handicap ought to bring you some way through—and for the ladies' single open and handicap. So you'll have a busy week."

"Yes, it will be jolly," assented Ethel. "Well, how is the time going? Violet and I ought to be getting back, for we are going into Torleigh at eleven, and I had nearly forgotten what I had come for. By the way, it was to ask you all to come up to tennis this afternoon; can you?"

"Rather. We looked upon that invitation as a dead 'cert,' and were keeping ourselves free for it," announced Nora. "Yes, rather, we'll come all right. Godfrey said we could accept for him too. He's gone down to bathe."

"Are you fond of tennis, Miss Nugent?" Tom asked her.

"No, I have never played," Violet answered.

"Never! Oh, I say, what an awful pity! You should just see Ethel play. She has a rattling good service too. What a pity you don't know how to play."

"Oh, it's not a game that I should care about at all," Violet rejoined. She did not like to have it supposed that she did not play because she could not. "It has always seemed to me such a very violent game."

"Girls play much violenter games than tennis," struck in Harold, forgetting his grammar in his excitement; "don't they, Nora?"

"Rather," said Nora, staring in amazement at a girl who could call tennis a violent game. And to think that she was a cousin of Ethel's, too! Well, it was not very likely that they would have much in common if she was that sort of girl.

The Anstruthers came up in full force that afternoon, and they played set after set of tennis, while Violet in a big picture hat and a long white dress sat in the shade of the trees and looked on. As they were five, they took it in turns to sit out until tea-time, when Nora pleaded fatigue and declined to play any more, and Ethel and the three boys had the court to themselves. She was simply indefatigable, and as Violet heard the boys declare that she was in excellent form, and as she noticed that it was generally Ethel and her partner who won, Violet came to the conclusion that her cousin really was a good player.

"Ethel is good at everything," said Nora, who was lying on the grass beside the low wicker chair in which Violet had been sitting all the afternoon. "I don't believe there is a single game that she couldn't be A 1 at if she liked."

Violet yawned a trifle ostentatiously. Truth to say, she was a little tired of hearing Ethel's praises sung. And the three boys were just as bad. From the court came cries of, "Well played, Ethel!" "Fine stroke that, Ethel!" "Good shot, Ethel!" Even her failures were applauded. "Hard luck that, Ethel!" one or other of them would say when she missed a ball, or "Oh, I say, well tried."

And Violet was, moreover, secretly very much aggrieved that so little notice had been taken of herself. For all

the attention that any one had paid to her she might, she thought indignantly, just as well not have been there. And to be expected to sit and watch other people playing tennis all through the afternoon was a little too much. It was really very selfish of Ethel not to have asked her to play. True, she had said that she could not play, and that she did not want to play, but still they ought to have tried to persuade her to alter her mind. So Violet allowed her sulky, injured feelings full sway, and Nora, finding that she got but short answers to her remarks, left the shady tree under which the chairs and the tea-table had been set out, and went to sit on the grassy bank that sloped up from one end of the tennis court, where, if she could not get much conversation, she at least secured a better coign of vantage from which to watch the game. Nora's departure was another cause of offence to Violet, and she had worked herself up into a very bad humour indeed, when towards seven o'clock Sir Laurence stepped out on to the terrace and came across the grass.

"Well, Violet," he said in his kindly tones as he took a chair beside his niece, "have you had some good games?"

"I haven't been playing," Violet answered.

"Not been playing! how's that?" inquired Sir Laurence, his eyes on the tennis court, where, with a low hard volley from the back of the court, Ethel had just won the game and the set for herself and her partner. "Oh, well played indeed! Capital stroke that." Then he turned to Violet again.

"But you should have been playing too. It has been a splendid afternoon for tennis—no wind, and not too warm."

"There were enough without me," Violet said, some of the bitterness that had been rising within her finding expression in her voice.

"Enough, yes, but not too many, surely," Sir Laurence said, somewhat puzzled by her tone. "Hasn't Nora been playing either?"

"Oh yes; but she plays better than I do."

At that moment Ethel, accompanied by the three boys and Nora, came up and sank with a sigh half of weariness, half of supreme content, on the grass at her uncle's feet.

"Such a glorious afternoon, Uncle Laurie!" she said; "and some good sets too."

"But why hasn't Violet been playing, Ethel?" he asked her at once.

"Violet doesn't play," Ethel answered. "It is really a great pity that you don't," she added, turning towards her cousin; "you have no idea how much pleasure you miss."

"I think Violet would have liked to have played," said Sir Laurence gravely; "it was only her unselfishness that prevented her from playing. She says you were enough without her."

Ethel's gray eyes opened wide at that, and she gazed straight at her cousin, who had the grace to blush. In fact, Sir Laurence's repetition of her remark had made her feel very uncomfortable, and she heartily wished that she had not permitted herself to give vent to her ill-humour before him.

"Oh, it was not altogether that," she felt compelled to say. "You see I knew that Ethel wanted to practise for

the tournament next week, and as I do not play at all well, I knew I should only have spoilt the game. And really, as I have watched them all running about in the hot sun, I have felt that I was having much the best of it here."

"It is very good and very unselfish of you to put it like that," said Sir Laurence, "but another time you must not sacrifice yourself in this way. But I am sure, Ethel, that you had no idea how much Violet would have liked to play, or you would have asked her to do so. You simply took her at her word, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Ethel, "I took her at her word." Had she in addition quoted Violet's exact words, Sir Laurence would have seen further into the situation than he did at the moment. But that Ethel's pride prevented her from doing.

"And you weren't exactly dressed for tennis, were you?" Nora said pointedly. "High-heeled patent shoes, and a white silk dress with a train two yards long, wouldn't have been a very good get-up to play in, would it?"

"No, indeed, it wouldn't," Violet answered. "I should have looked like one of the French ladies I once saw playing in Areto. They wore very, very long dresses," she continued, eagerly seizing the opportunity to change the conversation, "and had a band of elastic round their waist, which they called their 'elastique de tennis.' And they used to tuck up their skirts all round on this, and you couldn't think how funny and bunchy it looked. They wore big

hats too, that flopped over their eyes when they tried to run, and high-heeled walking shoes. You can't think how funny they looked. I used to scream with laughter."

"They must have looked queer," said Harold, joining in the general laughter which the picture she had called up provoked. "I wish I had seen them."

Ethel alone did not laugh. Her mouth was set in rather a scornful hard line. She perceived that Violet had sought to convey the impression to her uncle that she, Ethel, had been responsible for the fact that she had not played that afternoon. But not knowing that the words had been uttered more in a fit of ill temper, brought on by jealousy, than from *malice prepense*, she judged her rather more hardly than she deserved.

But though Violet had been so successful in her attempt to turn the conversation that the vexed question as to why she had not played was not again brought up by Sir Laurence, she knew very well that the incident had caused her to fall very considerably in Ethel's eyes.

And the consciousness made her unhappy; for though it was unfortunately true that Violet did not go the right way to work to gain the good opinion of those around her, she did not like to think that she had lost it. Meeting Ethel on the stairs a little later as they both went up to dress for dinner, she made a half-laughing, half-careless sort of apology for the reproof she had been the means of bringing down upon Ethel.

"I never thought that Uncle Laurence would have taken me up so seriously," she said. "The fact is, I

suppose that I was feeling a little bored, and just vented my feelings in a grumbling remark that really I did not half mean. And, as I say, I had no idea that Uncle Laurence would think I was in earnest."

"Uncle Laurence has a way of believing that people mean what they say," was Ethel's rather crushing reply. She was still angry with Violet. It was very rarely indeed that her uncle found fault with her, and the fact that Violet was directly responsible for the tacit rebuke that he had administered made it hard for her to forgive her cousin.

"Do you always mean what you say?" Violet asked, rather mockingly.

"Always," said Ethel in the same cold tone.

Violet sighed a little wistfully, and a softer note came into her voice.

"And do you never say what you do not mean?"

"Never," said Ethel steadily.

"I wish I was like that," Violet said suddenly, with one of the startling quick changes of mood habitual to her. "I know I exaggerate dreadfully, and am not so particular about the truth as I should be, but I don't mean to tell downright falsehoods. Indeed I don't, Ethel."

Ethel made no reply, but she thought that if Violet's misrepresentation of facts that afternoon did not amount to downright falsehood, it would be difficult to say in future what did and what did not constitute an untruth. Violet divined what was passing in her cousin's mind, and coloured uneasily.

"But at any rate it was very kind of you not to give me away," she said. "If you had liked, you could have contradicted me, and made me look very small indeed. So I am very grateful to you for not telling Uncle Laurence that it was, after all, entirely my own fault that I had not played tennis."

"You need not be grateful," Ethel said, pausing as they reached the door of Violet's bedroom—a tacit hint to her cousin not to accompany her further along the landing. "It was not for your sake that I said nothing. I am not in the habit of telling tales on any one, and it would have been telling tales to have let Uncle Laurence know that you were saying what was not the truth."

"And you preferred to take the blame of having behaved selfishly?" Violet cried in astonishment; but then, as the full extent of the scorn that Ethel felt for her dawned upon her mind, her sensation of gratitude dwindled away, and a feeling of resentment against the way in which she was being snubbed took possession of her instead.

"What a fuss about nothing!" she cried. "Why, I should not mind in the least if Uncle Laurence knew that I hadn't really wanted to play tennis at all."

And that was perfectly true. Violet was so used to giving way to impatient utterances that were no true index of her state of mind, that it was hard to realize what a grave fault this habit of hers would appear to a man like her uncle, whose strict rectitude of speech was one of his most striking characteristics. Had Violet gone

to him then and confessed her error, the words in season that he would have spoken, and which in their wisdom and tenderness would have been widely different to Ethel's scornful, disdainful utterance, might have sunk so deeply into her mind that they would have formed a turning point in her life.

"Then you had better tell him so," said Ethel, shrugging her shoulders with such very real indifference as to whether Violet did or did not, that, stung by her manner, the latter decided to keep her own counsel on the subject. After all, why should she do Ethel a good turn by exalting her in the eyes of her uncle at the expense of herself!

Then the two girls went their several ways without a word more being said on either side, and the opportunity of a better understanding being established between them was, entirely owing to the attitude displayed by Ethel, lost at any rate for the time being.

Chapter VI.

A DISAPPOINTMENT.

DURING the next few weeks all the people in the neighbourhood of Torleigh, and for many miles round, came to call at Nutcombe Hall in order to leave their cards on Mrs. Nugent. The sound of carriage wheels on the drive quickly grew to be a signal to Ethel to escape from the house and from that part of the garden which was in view of the front windows ; but as there was nothing Violet liked better than receiving callers with her mother—unless, indeed, it was driving out with her to return them—a very pleasant employment had been found for her.

Mrs. Nugent was sometimes nervously afraid that Ethel, suspecting that she was in the way, or angry because her place as mistress of the house had been usurped, was depriving herself of a very real pleasure in not accompanying them, and not even Ethel's assurances that she regarded calling as a dreadful waste of time could altogether reassure her.

It was remarkable, considering that they lived under the same roof and avoided each other of no set purpose, how very little Ethel and her aunt saw of one another.

To begin with, Mrs. Nugent breakfasted in bed, and although she was certainly down by eleven o'clock or a little after, Ethel, who was rarely in the house except at meal times, never saw her until lunch time. After lunch Mrs. Nugent went to her room and lay down until tea, from which function Ethel, as often as not, was absent. So that it was no uncommon event for aunt and niece to meet only at lunch and dinner throughout the entire day. Ethel scarcely saw more of Violet either. Even Sir Laurence, reluctant though he was to admit the fact to his mind, could not but see, before many days were over, how widely divergent were the tastes of his two nieces, and how little they had in common. From early morning until darkness drove her indoors, Ethel was out, active and busy with a thousand and one interests and pursuits to engage her attention and take up her time, while Violet was seemingly well content to do nothing but to lounge lazily with a book in comfortable chairs under the shade of trees. Now and again she got a tremendous fit of energy, inspired—though only Mrs. Nugent knew this—by a fear of getting fat, and would start out for a walk of ten or fifteen miles, probably in high-heeled shoes, a size too small for her, so that it was no wonder that she returned worn out and limping, and was so exhausted for the next few days that there really seemed some ground for her assertion that exercise did not suit her.

She could not ride, and although Sir Laurence told her that Bates, who had taught Ethel to ride, should

give her lessons if she wished, she would not consent to take any. She said she was nervous and that her heart was not strong enough for the exertion; but the real truth was that she did not wish to appear in the rôle of a beginner in an art at which her cousin was already proficient. For the same reason she would not play tennis, although kind-hearted Sir Laurence gave her a new racquet, and offered to teach her how to play.

"We will practise in private," he said, unconsciously divining the real reason of her reluctance to play, "and then one day you shall surprise Miss Ethel by your good play."

But Violet had so many fresh excuses each time that Sir Laurence came to her and said that a fitting opportunity for a game presented itself, that at last he left off asking her, and the new racquet in its new press remained untried.

Once the neighbourhood had realized that Sir Laurence's step-sister had come to live with him, and had begun to call upon her, Violet found plenty of occupation for her spare hours. After lunch, while her mother lay in her darkened room trying to get some of the sleep that would not come to her at night, and while Ethel was driving or bicycling to tennis either at the club or at some friend's house, Violet would be sitting before the glass doing her hair different ways, or trying on hats and dresses, and making up her mind what to wear that afternoon.

At such times Ruby was in constant requisition, and

the little maid enjoyed herself hugely, finding it infinitely more to her taste to be chatting confidentially with Miss Violet in her pretty bedroom, even though she had to brush her hair by the hour together and to be at her constant beck and call, than to be sitting downstairs in her grandmother's room sewing seam after seam in some tiresome garment.

The two cousins showed no signs of becoming the close companions that Mrs. Nugent and Sir Laurence had believed they might prove to be. Ethel could not like where she did not respect, and her cousin's want of regard for the truth shocked and repelled her. Though she had forgiven her the episode of the tennis she could not forget it, and close upon the heels of that incident, another, which showed Violet in a scarcely more edifying light, followed.

At luncheon a day or two afterwards the conversation turned upon boating, and Sir Laurence observed that he must organize a picnic in honour of his sister and niece, and show them the beauties of the coast.

"It must be a whole day picnic—eh, Ethel?—which is, I know, a thing that you love; and we will ask the Anstruthers and the Roberts and one or two other people to join us. Are none of the Anstruthers going to have a birthday, Ethel? For the celebration of it might serve as a pretext for the outing."

"It is Violet's birthday on the 25th," interposed Mrs. Nugent, "and I am sure she would be charmed to have it kept in the way you suggest, Laurence."

"Violet's birthday, eh? Why, that's capital!" Sir Laurence exclaimed. "And how old will you be, eh, dear?"

"Eighteen," Violet said, in slow, reluctant accents, and not daring to glance towards her cousin, who she felt rather than saw was regarding her with amazement plainly depicted upon her face. She remembered, and she saw too that Ethel remembered, the positive way in which she had asserted that she was a whole year younger than Ethel, whereas now the latter could not fail to perceive that she had been wilfully deceiving her on the point.

And it was such a paltry matter upon which to wish to deceive any one, Ethel reflected disdainfully; and as usual the thoughts that were passing in her mind were clearly written on her face, and Violet smarted under the silent condemnation that she read there.

"Eighteen!" repeated Sir Laurence, little guessing what was passing in the minds of his two nieces. "That makes just two months' difference between you, for Ethel was eighteen on the 22nd of June. Very well, then, we will fix our picnic for the 25th, and make a day of it somewhere."

Her eyes once opened to the untruthfulness which was unhappily such a grave fault of Violet's, Ethel, so to speak, gave her up. It did not seem possible that she could have anything at all in common with her; and though Violet, who, in spite of the jealousy she entertained for her cousin, really admired and liked her, made advances now and again, Ethel repulsed them, and was at no loss to conceal

the very disparaging opinion she held of Violet. But neither was she at any pains to express it; and it was just this indifference she manifested that exasperated Violet so greatly. Not that Ethel was ever rude or unkind to her, or that she ever again took Violet to task for her want of truthfulness. Neither did she avoid her in any marked manner. If she had planned any outing with the Anstruthers, or with any of her other friends, she always asked Violet if she would make one of the party; and Violet, more out of a spirit of contrariety than because she ever expected to derive any enjoyment from the fishing or boating expeditions in which all the young Anstruthers and Ethel took such delight, accepted these invitations. But sitting on a rock with a rod and line angling for bass, or sailing for mackerel, or anchored out in the bay for hours ground fishing, alike bored her, and one day, after she had pettishly refused ever to look at a line again, Ethel ceased to ask her to accompany her, and went without her.

And then, although she was infinitely happier sitting dressed up in her prettiest garments on the lawn, helping to entertain her mother's visitors, than she would have been out on the rocks or in a sailing boat, getting drenched now and again by an occasional wave, she chose, nevertheless, to feel aggrieved because Ethel was so completely indifferent as to whether she went with them or stayed away. But she did not dare to grumble again to Sir Laurence that she was left out in the cold, for, warned by the narrow escape she had had of being made to play

tennis against her will, she was seriously afraid that if she complained of Ethel's neglect her uncle would insist, willy-nilly, on her accompanying the boating parties.

"It is perfectly absurd what a fuss those Anstruthers make about Ethel," she said one day indignantly to her mother. It had been a broiling hot day, and she and her mother had just returned from a long round of visits, paid chiefly on people who lived several miles away on the other side of Torleigh. Sir Laurence, Roberts said, was up at the farm, and Miss Ethel had not yet returned from the tennis club. "They just do whatever she wants them to do," pursued Violet, as she and her mother seated themselves on two of the comfortable wickerwork chairs that stood on the cool east veranda. "They make her think that there is no one like her; and, of course, that spoils her dreadfully, and makes her so conceited that there is no standing her."

Mrs. Nugent sighed a little wearily—perhaps it might have been owing to the excessive warmth of the day, coupled with the recent exertions she had undergone; but she was looking both pale and tired, and there were dark lines under her eyes that spoke of physical exhaustion. She had sunk down on to her chair and closed her eyes as if glad of the chance of a few moments' rest and quiet, but at the sound of her daughter's querulous voice she opened them again and listened to her complaint against her cousin.

"I have noticed that you and Ethel do not get on," she said, "and I am sorry, for she is a dear girl."

An impatient sound escaped Violet's lips.

"You are just as bad as every one else, mother," she said. "I have heard you telling her over and over again that she is a dear, sweet girl. Why should you? There is nothing nice about her that I can see. She is just a mass of selfishness—that is what she is. Does she ever think of any one's pleasure but her own, tell me that."

"You are unjust to your cousin, Violet dear," Mrs. Nugent said quietly. "I think she is extremely good-natured. Aren't you at this moment wearing her prettiest hat? No sooner did you say at lunch to-day that you hadn't a decent hat than she said you were welcome to wear any one of hers that you liked. And the other day, when you had asked her to bring you a book from the library and she forgot, didn't she bicycle all the way back into Torleigh to fetch you one?"

"That was for her own sake, not for mine," said Violet ungraciously, and yet with a certain measure of truth. "She had promised to get me one, and she prides herself on never breaking her word. And as for this hat, it isn't such a pretty one after all. I dare say she only lent it to me because she knew I should look a perfect fright in it."

"O Violet, Violet, it pains me to see what ungenerous thoughts come into your mind," her mother said sadly. "You used not to harbour such uncharitable ideas, my darling."

"And once you used not to find fault with me," Violet answered sulkily. "You used to think everything that I did was right."

"You do well to remind me of it," Mrs. Nugent said, in the same sad tones. "I am afraid, Violet dear, I was blind to your faults, but now I cannot help seeing that this jealous dislike which you have taken to your cousin will, if you do not make a determined effort to check it, warp your whole nature."

To say that Violet was astonished would be to convey but a faint idea of the truth. She was nearly speechless with amazement. And when the fact that her mother had never in the whole course of her life censured her so severely was taken into consideration, it was small wonder that Violet should feel amazed.

"Oh, of course," she burst out at last, "if you are going to compare me, as every one else seems to do, with Ethel, and to my disadvantage, I have nothing more to say." And Violet made a movement as if she would rise and walk away. But her mother, leaning forward, laid a detaining hand upon her arm.

"My darling!" she exclaimed fondly, the better judgment that had caused her to speak sensibly to her daughter for once in her life swept away immediately by the fear of offending her. "Of course she can never be to me what you are. You know, my darling, that all my thoughts and wishes are bound up with you and with dear Wilfrid; that you are the joy of my life. If you do not like Ethel it must be her own fault. After all, girls know each other better than grown-up people ever can know them; and you are such a quick judge of

character, my dearest, that no doubt you have seen faults that no one else has perceived."

"I have," said Violet emphatically, her self-complacency quite restored by her mother's extravagant praise.

"And you are not angry with me any more, my darling? But you still love me just the same?"

"Oh yes," Violet answered, with half-impatient carelessness. It was not her relations with her mother that she wished to discuss at that moment. She had a good deal more to say on the subject of Ethel. And Mrs. Nugent, thankful that her daughter was no longer angry with her, listened without interruption to the many complaints which Violet brought against her cousin, weakly agreeing to everything she said when a pause on Violet's part gave permission for a comment to be made.

"I can't think why people make such a fuss about her," Violet repeated, harking back to her first grievance, and too much absorbed in running down her cousin to notice the increasing pallor of her mother's face. "She is not better looking than I am, and she doesn't dress nearly as well. Sometimes she looks too untidy for words. Yesterday, when Uncle Laurence and I were talking to the Bindons out here, Ethel came up the cliff path in the very shabbiest old serge dress you ever saw. She had no hat on, and her hair was all blown about, and her hands weren't overclean, and she was actually carrying half a dozen mackerel on a string; and yet, would you believe it, mother, instead of going round by the fields, as she could easily have done, she came straight across

the grass, and stood and talked to the Bindons for a long time. One would have thought that Uncle Laurence would have been ashamed of her, but he didn't seem to be, and the Bindons took far more notice of her than they had taken of me."

"Very rude of them, dear," said Mrs. Nugent, opening her eyes, which had been closed during Violet's speech. "But then," soothingly, "you mustn't mind what people like that do. Though they are very rich, and Mrs. Bindon does dress beautifully, they are not people of any particular birth, and such people always think a great deal of money."

"But Ethel hasn't got any money," Violet said, "except what Uncle Laurence gives her."

"Oh yes, she has, or rather will have when she is twenty-one," said Mrs. Nugent. "For then she will have about five thousand pounds a year of her own."

"Ethel will have!" Violet exclaimed in a high key. "Who told you so? Did Uncle Laurence?"

"No; it was Mrs. Forrest or Mrs. Anstruther who told me. I really forget which. But when I mentioned what I had heard to your uncle, he nodded, as much as to say that it was quite true, and then turned the subject."

For a moment Violet was silent. Then she suddenly burst into tears.

"Oh, it is too bad that she should have everything and I nothing," she sobbed. "No wonder she is conceited and spoilt. O mother, I do think it is hard that I am not an heiress."

Mrs. Nugent sighed. "You would have been, dear, or at least you would have been very rich, if things had gone right with your poor father," she said. "However, it's no good thinking of that now. Cheer up, my darling. No good, at any rate, ever came of grudging anybody else's good fortune."

But Violet was not so easily consoled. The news that Ethel was heiress to such a large fortune came upon her as quite a shock, and she could think of nothing else. She questioned her mother in the hope of eliciting further details, but Mrs. Nugent could add little to what she had already told her.

"We were interrupted, I think," she said. "Yes, now I remember. It was Mrs. Anstruther who told me, for Nora and a whole pack of dogs behind her came streaming into the room just at the moment. And then the matter passed out of my mind. And now, dear, I think I will go to my room and lie down. My head is getting worse." And gathering up her parasol and her gloves, Mrs. Nugent went into the house, leaving Violet to brood over the astounding news that had just been imparted to her.

As it happened, the question of Ethel's inheritance was just then occupying the attention of a person whom it concerned still more nearly than it did Violet, and that person was Ethel herself. Since she had come home she had been so much taken up with tennis tournaments and golf, and one thing and another, that she had really not had much time to take the question of her hunting during the coming winter into consideration. She had long ago

made up her mind that when she came home for good she was going to keep at the very least three hunters. There was no reason at all why she should not. With the income of five thousand pounds a year that was to be hers in the near future, she could very well afford to buy three of the very best horses that were to be bought; the stables at Nutcombe were big enough to hold them; and if Bates and the two lads who worked under him were unequal to looking after them, she could pay the wages of as many extra grooms as might be required. Yet though there could be no possible objection on the score of expense to her keeping a dozen horses if she were minded so to do, Ethel had an inkling that Sir Laurence did not approve of her intention to keep any horses of her own. That he liked her to ride and to hunt she knew, for even when she had been a little girl home for the holidays she had gone regularly to all the near meets with him, and many were the exciting gallops that, mounted on Jack, who in his younger days had been a famous pony, she had had after the hounds. Why, then, since he had always known of her ardent desire to hunt when she left school, should he throw cold water on her schemes now? For his manner when she had broached the subject to him on the first morning after her return home had plainly shown her that he was averse to the idea of her keeping hunters, and Ethel had felt for some days past that she would like to come to an understanding with him upon the subject.

The opportunity she sought came that evening. Mrs.

Nugent did not come down to dinner, and Violet, who brought her mother's excuses, and explained that she was suffering from a more than usually severe headache, herself introduced the subject that was, oddly enough, occupying Ethel's thoughts at the moment.

"I have only heard your great news this evening, Ethel," she began, glancing across the table at her cousin before she had tasted her first mouthful of soup. "You must let me congratulate you. I had no idea that you were such a tremendously important person."

"I an important person!" Ethel said, in a surprised tone, not knowing in the least to what her cousin alluded. "Why, what have I done?"

"It is not what you have done, but what you have," explained Violet. "And I hear that you have five thousand pounds a year of your very own. Please tell me all about it. Mother just mentioned it in the most tantalizing way possible this afternoon, but did not know anything beyond the bare fact that you were a great heiress. Mrs. Anstruther had told her so, I believe. Aren't you excited whenever you think about it?"

"No, I don't think I am," said Ethel, laughing a little at the idea of living in a state of perpetual excitement. "You see, I have had time to become accustomed to the idea that I am an heiress. I have known it ever since I was a child of five or six."

"Well, if you aren't excited you are glad, I suppose," Violet said, glancing curiously at her cousin. "It must be lovely to be an heiress, I should think."

"Of course I'm glad," said Ethel promptly. "It is nice to be an heiress, and to know that I shall always have lots of money, and a nice old place into the bargain."

"A place too!" Violet exclaimed. "What is it called, and where is it?"

"It is called Aylewood Manor, and it is in Sussex," Ethel made answer. "But Uncle Laurence can tell you more about it than I can. I only saw it once, when I was quite a child, and really hardly remember anything about it."

"Oh, do tell me something more about it, Uncle Laurence," Violet exclaimed, turning eagerly towards Sir Laurence, who had been eating his soup silently during the swift interchange of question and answer that had been taking place between his two nieces. "Who does Ethel inherit it from, Uncle Laurence?"

"From her father," Sir Laurence replied. He spoke slowly, and almost as though he were unwilling to continue the topic. The curious constraint in his manner did not escape Ethel. Almost unconsciously to herself she had been prepared for it. She had noticed it the other day when she had asked him about the horses, and it brought to her mind again the fact that had presented itself to her during her walk over the cliffs with Violet—namely, that on his own accord he rarely, if ever, alluded to the fact of her inheritance.

But Violet, at all events, did not notice his reluctance to pursue the topic, and she plied both him and Ethel with questions about Aylewood. She particularly wanted

to know why, if Ethel owned such a lovely place of her own, she was not then living in it.

"It is not hers until she comes of age, nearly three years hence, and at present it is let," said Sir Laurence.

"Oh, it must make you long to come of age at once," Violet exclaimed. "If I were you, Ethel, I should feel as if those three years would never, never pass."

"Oh, they will pass soon enough," Ethel answered, "and I shall be twenty-one before I know where I am."

"And then you will go and live at Aylewood, I suppose," Violet said, "with your own servants, and your own carriages and horses and everything. O Ethel, I do wish I were you! And will you go and live there too, Uncle Laurence?"

"I don't believe Uncle Laurence would leave dear old Nutcombe to live in Buckingham Palace," Ethel cried, "and I shall never live anywhere where he doesn't."

"But—" Violet was beginning, when Ethel interrupted her with a touch of impatience.

"We have talked enough about Aylewood and me," she said. "Let's talk about something else."

"Where did you and your mother go to-day?" Sir Laurence asked, backing up Ethel's desire for a change of subject. And Violet, nothing loath, gave a detailed account of their afternoon's doings, in the course of which it transpired that they had paid eleven calls, found seven out of the eleven people in, and had had tea no less than four times.

"No wonder poor Aunt Isabel finished up with a bad

headache," Ethel said, without, it must be confessed, much sympathy in her tone. "Fancy paying eleven calls! What an awful, stupendous waste of time. You wouldn't catch me doing it, in a hurry."

"But, my dear Ethel," Sir Laurence said, turning towards her, "you would have been obliged to have returned most of these calls yourself, were it not that your aunt and cousin are kind enough to do them for you. You were included in the act of polite attention which these people paid in calling here, so, instead of exclaiming at the way in which your aunt and cousin waste their time, as you somewhat impolitely call it, you ought to be grateful to them for relieving you of the necessity of going too."

"Oh, I am grateful," Ethel exclaimed, in a tone of such heartfelt thankfulness that Sir Laurence could scarcely help smiling—"more grateful than I can say."

"Well, I don't know if you ought to rest content with being grateful," pursued Sir Laurence. "I am not sure that you ought not to take turns with Violet in going, and give her an afternoon off occasionally."

"But I like paying calls, Uncle Laurence," Violet hastened to say. The lesson conveyed by the tennis episode had not been lost upon her, and she had not again attempted to mislead Sir Laurence on the subject of her real wishes.

"'Jack Spratt, he liked no lean—his wife, she liked no fat,'" quoted Ethel, "so we are both pleased, Uncle Laurence. But don't you think," she added, looking up

into his face with a mischievous smile, "that you ought to take turns with Aunt Isabel in going, and give her an afternoon off occasionally?"

Sir Laurence laughed.

"I should make such a wretched substitute," he answered, "that I should not dare to propose myself."

"Just how I feel," averred Ethel. "However smartly I dressed myself up, and however nicely I talked, I could never make myself as agreeable and pleasant to everybody as Violet makes herself. So it is a mutual sense of our own shortcomings in the social conventionalities that keeps us at home, eh, Uncle Laurence? You and I were not meant to sit and talk about frocks and fashions by the hour together."

There was a faint although quite unconscious tinge of patronage in Ethel's manner as she made that last remark. It was evident that she considered herself rather above taking part in the style of conversation to which she referred. And though Violet, pleased at Ethel's allusion to the fact—a perfectly true one—that she made herself pleasant and agreeable to every one, did not notice the disparaging conclusion of the sentence, Sir Laurence felt bound to challenge it on behalf of his step-sister and niece.

"I do not fancy that your aunt and cousin and the ladies whom they visit spend all their time in discussing the latest fashions," he said. "For instance, I think I heard you say that you were going to see Lady Newman

to-day. If she showed you her picture gallery, I am sure you did not talk fashions there."

"No, indeed we did not," Violet exclaimed eagerly, her face lighting up with sudden enthusiasm in a manner most rare to it. "Oh, Uncle Laurence, aren't her pictures just wonderful?"

"Yes, she has a very fine collection," Sir Laurence said, pleased at the enthusiasm he had evoked. "Considering its comparatively small size, it is one of the finest private collections in England."

"It was a treat to be allowed to go through the gallery," Violet said. "Just think, Ethel, there are Velasquezes and Rembrandts, some sketches of Michael Angelo's, a Murillo, several Joshua Reynoldses and Gainsboroughs, and Raeburns and Turners and Constables; and oh! it seemed to me that there was at least one picture by every artist one has ever heard of. But, of course, you have been into the gallery, Ethel?"

"Oh yes," said Ethel. "And I remember I shocked Lady Newman dreadfully by saying that the great square room with its polished floor would make a splendid ballroom. And I am afraid that I was so taken up with that idea that I scarcely looked at the pictures. Don't look so shocked, Violet," she added with a laugh. "I am afraid good pictures would be quite thrown away on me, for I am quite sure that I could not tell a Rembrandt from a Gainsborough."

Violet's face was a study. That any one, being so ignorant, could so cheerfully own to it, amazed her. But

after such a confession she felt that it would be useless to discuss pictures with Ethel, and so directed all her conversation to Sir Laurence. Consequently the rest of the meal, so far as Ethel was concerned at least, was a silent one. But it was a revelation to her, and to Sir Laurence, too, to discover how intelligently Violet could talk on the subject of art and pictures. It transpired that during the month she had spent in London with her mother when they first arrived from Canada, she had visited as many of the picture galleries as she could find time for; that, as they had crossed to the Continent by way of Antwerp, they had spent a few days in Holland in order to see the Dutch masters; and that in both Rome and Florence she had visited and sketched in the galleries.

For so young a girl, her artistic perceptions were wonderfully developed, and her critical faculty was good.

Ethel, sitting silently on the opposite side of the table, marvelled at the change that came over Violet as she talked. She hardly looked like the same girl: gone were her affected smiles, her drawling speeches, and the thousand and one little tricks of manner that she cultivated because she thought they were effective. She spoke in a simple, natural manner, and Ethel thought to herself that, if she only knew how infinitely better it became her, she would never adopt any other.

"By the way, Violet," Sir Laurence said presently, "you have never shown me any of your own sketches or drawings; I should like to see them. Your mother

tells me that you worked very hard last winter in Rome, and harder still at the school you attended in Montreal."

"Oh, my things are not worth looking at, Uncle Laurence," Violet said earnestly, and with no mock modesty in her manner. "And I have not worked as hard as I ought, I am sorry to say."

A pang of regret went through her as she realized how true that confession was. She had wasted her opportunities, and misused her undoubted talent. And with her imagination freshly stirred, not only by the contemplation of the great pictures that she had been privileged to see that afternoon, but by her conversation with her uncle, she felt that the gift that was hers, infinitely puny though it might be in comparison with the least of the names that had sprung to her lips that evening, had yet been given to her to use, and that she had wasted more opportunities of cultivating it than she cared at the moment to recall.

"Oh, well, you are young yet," Sir Laurence said. But he checked the smile that came to his face at the tragic earnestness of her tone. He felt instinctively that Violet's was a nature that needed to be spurred rather than curbed. Had she been enthusiastic in the pursuit of her art, she would scarcely have let three weeks slip by without touching pencil or brush, and he had not yet seen her with either in her hand.

"You must have a studio," he said in a tone of decision, "and set to work again seriously, and I must see about lessons for you. I shall consult Lady New-

man on that point, however. She will tell me if there is any good artist in the neighbourhood whose studio you might attend. I think I heard her mention one the other day. Meanwhile you must have a workshop of your own—a big room with a north light would serve, I daresay. Well,” as Violet gave an eager assent, “in that case you are easily provided for. I will ask Mrs. Mudge to-morrow to have one of the north bedrooms cleared of all the furniture that is in it at present, and it shall be fitted up as a studio and dedicated to your sole use.”

Violet was delighted. More than once during the past few days she had longed to take up work again; but the means of doing so not being ready to hand, she had not had sufficient energy to put her wish into practical execution. But now the thought of a studio of her own infused an ardent desire in her to begin painting again, and as soon as dinner was over she went upstairs with Sir Laurence to see the room that he proposed to give her.

Ethel, who had purposed holding a quiet conversation with Sir Laurence in his study on the all-important question of her horses and hunting, was obliged to wait with what patience she could command, in the hall below, until the inspection was over. But her patience was not very severely tried. Mrs. Mudge had been summoned to the conference upstairs, and had not only promised to clear the room as speedily as possible the next morning, but had also undertaken to hunt up some odd bits of furniture, such as a divan, a chair or so,

and some pretty hangings, to take away from the bare aspect of the room. So, leaving his niece and the old housekeeper together, deep in a discussion as to whether dark indigo coloured curtains or madder ones would look best against the walls, Sir Laurence, his thoughts turning towards the *Times* and his study armchair, came down the stairs by himself, only to find another niece waiting to interview him.

As soon as Ethel had asked for and received permission to accompany him to his study, and the door was shut, she went, according to her custom, straight to the point.

"Uncle Laurence," she said, taking up her position on the hearthrug, and facing him as he sat in his revolving chair beside his big desk in the window, "I want to know, please, if I may buy three horses, and hunt this winter?"

Sir Laurence, in the half-absent manner peculiar to him when his thoughts were busy, took an ivory paper-cutter from the desk, and holding it in his right hand, thoughtfully tapped the nails of his left.

"Will you be very disappointed if I say 'No' to that?" he asked at last.

"Yes, indeed I will," she answered promptly. "But surely, Uncle Laurence, you are not going to say it? I know you don't think there is any harm in ladies hunting; and as far as the money goes, I suppose I am rich enough to buy thirteen or thirty horses, if I wanted to, instead of three."

"You do not come into your fortune until you are twenty-one, remember," Sir Laurence said, "so that, however rich you may be then, you have nothing at present beyond the fifty pounds a year I allow you as pocket-money."

"Yes, I know that, Uncle Laurence; but you can advance me what you like," Ethel said eagerly. "You did not think that I was so greedy as to want you to pay for the horses out of your own pocket, while I must have such heaps of money lying idle?"

"No," he said, "I did not misunderstand you; I knew what you meant well enough. I am sorry for your disappointment, dear, but I cannot—" he paused, and corrected himself. "I meant I will not make you any such advance, or permit you to anticipate the spending of even as much as a single five pounds of the money that will be yours when you come of age. And therefore I am afraid that you must put all thought of hunting—at any rate on the extensive scale you propose—out of your head."

Ethel heard him in a sort of stunned silence. She knew the tone of decision in which he spoke far too well to hope that either entreaty or argument would be of any avail with him; and had any other matter, save only that of her hunting, been in the question, she would have submitted with the best grace she could. But her heart was so set upon getting her own way that, in spite of her instinctive feeling that she was only wasting words, she began to plead with him to change his mind.

"Why shouldn't I hunt now, instead of waiting three winters—three whole, long winters?" she concluded, when she had exhausted all the arguments she could get together in support of her cause. "Just think of all the time I should be losing, and all the pleasure! Oh, please, Uncle Laurence," coaxingly, "say that you did not mean it. There is nothing in this world that I am so keen on as hunting, and I have always looked forward to going in for it in real earnest when I left school."

"I am sorry, Ethel," Sir Laurence repeated; "but long ago I resolved that I would never touch a penny of your money while you and it were under my guardianship. When you come of age, it passes, as you know, into your own control, and then you will be absolute mistress of it, and can do exactly what you please with it."

"But why did you make that resolution, Uncle Laurence?" Ethel cried. "Do you mean that the money has been coming in all these years, and that none of it has ever been spent?"

"Yes, that is what I mean. Now," with a sudden twinkle in his eyes, "don't run away with the idea that I am a wicked uncle in a story book who has abused his guardianship and embezzled the money. It has all been regularly invested in Government securities, deducting only what has been necessary to spend on Aylewood in one way and another, so that at this moment the accumulated income, with interest and rise of stocks and so forth, stands at about sixty thousand pounds."

"Sixty thousand pounds!" repeated Ethel, so astonished at the amount of the sum that her uncle had named that she forgot for the moment the subject under immediate discussion. "I had no idea that you had been saving all that up for me every year. And oh, Uncle Laurence," she added, returning to the charge, "as I am to have all that money, I do think you might let me buy the horses."

"I have told you, Ethel, that I cannot consent to your doing so," Sir Laurence answered. "Come, dear, you have always known how to take 'No' for an answer. Make up your mind that I really mean what I say, and let us end this discussion."

He spoke kindly but firmly, and Ethel, recognizing this time that his purpose was inflexible, made a valiant attempt to crush down her disappointment and to accept his decision as final; but such a Spartan-like spirit was beyond her. She could not even yet bring herself to submit to his decision, and it was with the hope of being able still to influence him to change his mind, by combating the reasons that had led him to make that resolution of which he had spoken, not to touch or to allow her to touch one penny of her fortune until she came of age, that she asked him to tell her what they were.

"They are reasons that seem to me sufficient for acting as I have acted, and as I shall continue to act," he answered, more gravely than he had yet spoken; "but you will not know them, Ethel, until you come of age. Then I will tell you what they are."

"Well, I must say," said Ethel, drumming impatiently with her fingers on the mantelpiece as she spoke, "I cannot see why you can't tell me your reasons now, Uncle Laurence. You tell me that I am ever so much richer than I thought I was—that, besides having five thousand pounds a year, there is all that huge sum laid by—and yet you won't even let me keep three horses."

"I dare say that, from your point of view, it does seem hard," Sir Laurence answered. "But there it is, and like a sensible girl you must make the best of it. Come, Ethel, I have never yet behaved like an unreasonable tyrant to you, have I—"

"Not until now," threw in Ethel, with a wry smile.

"So give me credit," pursued Sir Laurence, unheeding the interruption, "of doing only what I conceive to be my duty now. I am sure you know that it is no pleasure to me to have to refuse you anything; but there it is, I am obliged to refuse you this, and there is an end of it."

"I can't see even now why you are obliged to refuse," sighed Ethel. "And when you know how I have always counted on hunting a lot, I do think it is awfully hard luck. So you mean that I am not to ride at all this winter then?" she asked suddenly, "for I simply can't ride Jack any more."

"No, no; poor old fellow, he's quite past work," Sir Laurence answered. "Well, we will see what will happen later."

He had quite made up his mind to buy Ethel one

horse, but he did not mean to inform her of his intention then. Although, when she had recovered from her present disappointment, she would be the first to recognize that half a loaf was better than no bread, he saw that she was in no mood to appreciate that fact now. He must first give her time to get over the blow that his decision had caused her.

"Very well, Uncle Laurence," Ethel said, as she moved away from the fireplace and slowly straightened herself, "I won't bother you any more, though it would be no good to say that I'm not just frightfully disappointed about it, for I am. And when I come of age I shall buy a stableful of horses to console me for the pangs that I am undergoing now."

The last words were flung over her shoulder as she reached the door, and the next moment Sir Laurence found himself alone.

Though her uncle had refused to give her his reasons for not allowing her to keep horses on the extensive scale she had proposed, Ethel felt sure nevertheless that it was because he did not wish her tastes to become too extravagant. Few things, she had observed, annoyed him more than for people to allude in his hearing to her future riches, and to say that they supposed that when she came of age she would do this or that, both "this" and "that" involving a considerable expenditure of money.

"I suppose all guardians are careful of their wards' money," she mused. "But Uncle Laurence must be

quite the most careful guardian in the world. However, as it is obviously no good getting cross about it, cross I will not get. When Uncle Laurence looks as he looked when he said that he was acting as he thought right, no power on earth will get him to act otherwise. I know that only too well."

As Sir Laurence had said, Ethel knew how to take "No" for an answer; and though his refusal that evening had been a severer blow to her than even he quite realized, she accepted it as final and did not again seek to open the question.

Chapter VII.

WILFRID NUGENT.

“ I THINK, Isabel,” Sir Laurence said one evening after dinner, towards the end of the month, when he and his sister and the two girls were sitting out on the veranda—“ I think, Isabel, we ought to give a dance for these two children. What do you say ? ”

Mrs. Nugent had no chance of saying anything, because before she could reply both Violet and Ethel gave utterance to loud exclamations of delight.

“ That’s a perfectly splendid idea, Uncle Laurence,” Ethel said approvingly. “ When shall it be ? ”

“ Well,” said Sir Laurence, “ as to that there is no immediate hurry. Some time in October would be quite soon enough, I should think, eh ? What do you say, Violet ? ”

“ Oh, quite soon enough, Uncle Laurence,” she answered ; “ for then Wilfrid will be here, and he does love dancing so much.”

“ Yes ; it would be a pity to have it before he came,” added Mrs. Nugent. “ The poor boy doesn’t get many pleasures, and he would enjoy a ball immensely. I don’t suppose he has been to one since my dear husband died and our dear old home was broken up.”

And Mrs. Nugent sighed, and passed her handkerchief across her eyes.

"Well, he shall enjoy this one," Sir Laurence said, in his genial, hearty tones. "When is he coming, Isabel?"

"Oh, quite early in the month, I hope," said Mrs. Nugent. "But he will only be able to stay a fortnight; his uncle will not give him longer than that. I think it is dreadfully hard that the poor dear boy should be treated just as if he were an ordinary clerk and not his nephew. And Wilfrid is such a good boy; he never grumbles or appears to think he is ill used, but is always cheerful and merry."

"That's right," said Sir Laurence approvingly; "that is the way for a boy to get on, and to commend himself to his chief. Let him do the best of which he is capable, and you may be sure that he will never have cause to regret it. Mr. Thomas Nugent may be a hard man of business, but he is a just man too, and you may depend upon it that he will not forget that Wilfrid is his nephew. Well, we must give the boy a good time while he is with us. What shall we do to amuse him, eh, Ethel? It will be too late for tennis, I'm afraid."

"There will be hockey and golf, though," said Ethel, who, sitting on the sill of the long French window, was availing herself of the light of the lamp in the drawing-room behind her to read a letter. She laid it down on her lap as her uncle spoke, however, and duly considered the important question as to how Wilfrid was to be entertained during his forthcoming visit. "And we can go sailing and fishing, and oh! why, there is always heaps to

do. But then, of course, I don't know what his tastes are," she added, "and he may not care for any of these things."

"Oh yes, he does," exclaimed Violet instantly, resenting the faint touch of disparagement that had crept into Ethel's voice. "Wilfrid likes every sort of outdoor sport, and is very good at them all. He shoots well and rides well, and swims better than any one of the Anstruther boys."

"That's all right then," said Ethel carelessly, not even perceiving that she had offended Violet. "I daresay Mr. Lambton will give him some shooting if he hears that Wilfrid is keen on it, and there are any amount of rabbits in our own fields."

Then she picked up the letter in which she had been absorbed prior to Sir Laurence's remark about the ball, and was speedily immersed in its contents again. It was from her school friend Ida Green, and gave her such surprising news that even the thought of the forthcoming ball could not dwell in her mind for long. The two girls had exchanged several letters since they had left Hampstead; but Ethel's last letter had remained so long unanswered that she had been meditating the dispatch of an indignant post card when this letter arrived, and the news it contained speedily caused Ethel's anger against her friend, which had not been so very deep after all, to melt away.

"I have simply been too busy to write," so ran Ida's letter, "and I have the most astonishing thing to tell you, Ethel—so astonishing that I can hardly believe it myself. Father has just married Miss Fletcher. When I say just,

I mean nearly a fortnight ago ; and they came back from the Lakes, where they went for their honeymoon, three or four days ago. I can't tell you how pleased I am, for I like Beatrice—she has asked me to call her that—very much indeed. As for the children, they just adore her ; and if it were only for their sakes, I should be only too glad that she has come to live with us. And then father, too, is so happy. Instead of going off to his study now directly meals are over, he sits and talks with us ; and it is easy to see how pleased he is at the thought of having some one to enter into all his schemes for his poor people, and the parish generally. I used to try terribly hard to do that, but father soon found out that my heart was not really in his work, and so he never cared to talk to me about it.

“And now, Ethel, to come to my own affairs. Of course the fact that father is married, and that the children have some one to look after them—and some one, too, who can do it far better than I ever could—leaves me quite free to go away from home. In fact, I must go out now and earn my own living somehow. It would not be right for me to stay at home and do nothing ; and though Beatrice has told me that she would never have married father if she thought that by so doing she would make me feel homeless, she knows that I know her too well to think for one moment that she wishes me to leave home. But I shall go all the same, and I know that in her heart Beatrice thinks it is as well that I should take up work of some sort. I spoke to father to-night about going on the stage, and he is quite willing for me to go on if any man-

ager will take me. It is my private opinion though, Ethel, that he has strong, unflattering doubts as to that; but the Cavendish Comedy Company will be here in a fortnight's time, and then I am to see Mr. Wilkinson. It is just barely possible that he may have a part to offer me. But you will think that I have written quite enough about my own affairs (I know you won't really think anything of the sort, but I have nothing more at present to tell you about them). So good-bye, dear Ethel.—With much love, your affectionate friend,

IDA."

"Well, that is a long letter, and, to judge by your expression, an interesting one," Sir Laurence remarked, as Ethel, her thoughts still busy with her friend, slowly folded up the letter.

"It is from Ida, Uncle Laurence. You remember Ida Green, the girl who stayed with me last Christmas? Well," as Sir Laurence nodded, "her father has just married again."

"Poor girl," said Mrs. Nugent sympathetically. "And that letter, I suppose, pours out all her troubles to you?"

"Quite the other way round," said Ethel; "she is as delighted as she can be. But I will read you what she says about it if you like."

And unfolding her letter again, Ethel read the part of it that referred to Mr. Green's marriage aloud to her interested audience.

"Ah, well, I hope the children will continue to like their new step-mother," said Mrs. Nugent, when she had finished,

in a tone that implied that she had strong doubts as to their doing anything of the sort.

"Up to the present, at any rate, they are charmed with her," said Ethel, laughing a little at her aunt's sceptical tone.

"You must keep us posted in your friend's news, Ethel," said Sir Laurence. "I hope she will succeed in getting into that company she mentions. I remember she was always very fond of plays and acting, and would make, I should think, a very clever and charming young actress. I shall be interested to hear how she gets on."

"And I shall be interested to hear if the children continued to like their step-mother," added Mrs. Nugent.

It was not very long before Ethel was able to answer both those points in the affirmative. For in about three weeks' time she received a letter from Ida, telling her that a vacancy had occurred in the Cavendish Company a week before it came to Liverpool, and that Mr. Wilkinson had consented to take her on a short trial. "So that at this moment I am actually, and truly, and really, and without the faintest possible shadow of doubt whatever, a real live actress," Ida wrote, evidently in such a state of joyous excitement that her spirits fairly bubbled over. "The part is a small one—a mere walk on, in fact; but I have plenty to do, for I understudy the second leading lady, if you know what that means, and have to attend rehearsal every morning for two or three hours. But I have got my foot on the lowest rung of the ladder now, and I mean to climb up, and up, and up, until I reach the top—unless, oh awful

thought! Mr. Wilkinson tells me at the end of a few weeks' trial that I am no good, and walks off with the ladder—otherwise the company—leaving me disconsolate. However, I don't mean to think of anything so dreadful, but just do my best. The other members of the company are so kind, and ready to do anything to help me. They are all ladies and gentlemen, which makes it ever so much nicer. I am to share rooms with a Miss Chester, so that I shan't have to go into lodgings by myself, which would have been very lonely work. Just think, we—doesn't that sound important?—we then are booked to go to Manchester, Newcastle, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dublin, Southampton, Jersey, several big towns on the south coast, and then Bristol, Taunton, Exeter, and Barnstow. I haven't put all these in their right order, but their mere names will give you an idea of the travelled person I shall have become before you see me again. And, of course, when I appear in your county you will come and see me act. I shall, I hope, have lost every scrap of nervousness by that time, and intend to strike you as a finished and accomplished actress. Ethel, you can't think how good and kind Beatrice is. She insists upon making me an allowance until I am earning more money for myself—for, of course, what Mr. Wilkinson is giving me to start with is very little; and though I tell her I could just manage on it, she won't let me try. Freda and Fred are really becoming quite pattern children. They fairly worship Beatrice, and would do anything in the world for her. And father, too, is so happy. He has quite lost the half-grave, half-melancholy look he used to

wear, and looks years younger than he did a few months ago. So that, altogether, it was a very good day for us when Beatrice became his wife. Your aunt's idea that she was going to be the harsh step-mother of the story books amused me very much ; but, all the same, it was very kind of Mrs. Nugent to feel so concerned for us. One can tell from that, I think, how very kind and sympathetic Mrs. Nugent must be."

"Can one?" mused Ethel. "Somehow it never struck me before that Aunt Isabel was either kind or sympathetic, and yet I daresay she is."

Even Ethel, little though she cared to analyze the thoughts and feelings of those around her, could not help perceiving how genuine was the relief and pleasure with which Mrs. Nugent heard that her fears regarding Ida's step-mother were without foundation.

"We must certainly go over and see Miss Ida act when she comes to Barnstown, eh, Ethel?" said her uncle. "But if she has to go to all these other places first, she won't be in our direction for some months to come."

"No, not if she is going to scamper all over Scotland and Ireland, and take a look at the Channel Islands too," said Ethel. "I wish she were coming here first. But I'll tell you what I should like to do, Uncle Laurence, when she comes to Barnstown, and that is to stay with her for the week she is there. And then I could see her act every night."

"Very well, my dear," returned her uncle, who, since the question of Ethel's hunting had been thrashed out between

them, and had been settled in a way so very disappointing to Ethel's hopes, had been glad when he could accede, as in the present instance, to her wishes. "It would be a pity to miss such a chance of seeing something of your friend. You may certainly go, and we must see about some nice rooms for you both beforehand."

So Ethel went up to write a long letter to Ida, congratulating her on having started on her career, and telling her of the plan she had in view to spend a week with her when the company came to Barnstown.

Then, for it was still early in the morning, she pumped up her bicycle and rode with Nora to the village of Three Elms, where, just beyond the cross roads, there was to be a meet of the hounds at half-past ten.

It was a glorious October morning. There had been a slight touch of frost overnight, but all hint of it had gone now; the sky was a clear, brilliant blue, the sun shone warmly, the hedgerows were still green, and only the rich red and yellow tints of the trees gave warning that autumn was upon them.

"I love October," Ethel exclaimed, as she and Nora raced side by side down a long steep hill; "it is one of the nicest months of the year."

"O Ethel!" remonstrated Nora, "how can you say that, when one has the dreadful thought all the time that winter is close at hand!"

"Then that just shows that one should not anticipate trouble," said Ethel sagely. "If you refuse to revel in this splendid morning simply because it comes at the end of

summer instead of at the beginning, why you can, but I mean to enjoy it."

And enjoy it Ethel did. She and Nora reached Three Elms rather before the time appointed for the meet. But as there were many people there that she knew, she did not find the wait at all tedious. As it happened, however, there were no other bicyclists out that morning save themselves.

"You will find the roads very heavy for bicycling, Ethel," said Miss Frances Keble, reining up beside the gate against which Ethel and Nora were standing. "We are going to draw the wood first, and then cross the stream near Barton Mill. If you want to see anything you had better leave your bicycles here and follow on foot."

"Oh, I think we shall stick to our bikes, Frances," said Ethel, glancing at the pretty horse that Frances was riding. She was the only daughter of Mr. Keble, the M.F.H., and she and Ethel, though they had never been very intimate friends, had known one another for years.

"But why aren't you riding, Ethel?" Frances pursued, not without some curiosity. "I thought you meant to hunt regularly this winter and keep ever so many hunters. But you haven't been out once yet. Why aren't you riding to-day?"

"Do you think it can be because I am afraid of falling off?" said Ethel, smiling up at the inquisitive face above her.

"No, of course not," said Frances, while Nora began to giggle. "It must be very slow on a bicycle, I should

think. You can't take any jumps or anything, cross ploughed fields or anything, can you?"

"Can't we, that's all!" said Nora, unable to resist the chance of teasing Frances a little. "That just shows how little you know our bicycles. We touch a special patent spring in the handles, and we fly over a five-barred gate with the greatest ease; and as for fields, why, these tyres, ordinary though they look, are specially made for ploughed land, and we just skim lightly over the surface without sinking in in the very least."

"I don't believe a word of it," declared Frances, looking, however, uncertain whether to do so or not. "I don't believe bicycles like that were ever made."

"You wait until you see us at work," said Nora, who was as grave as a judge. "Ethel and I are going to lead the field to-day, and when your horses get fagged out you will be ready to die with envy at the sight of us sailing as fresh as paint over hedges, ditches, five-barred gates, houses—"

"Houses!" echoed the startled Frances, her eyes growing round with amazement.

"Houses," repeated Nora firmly, "though, of course, not very high ones."

A low, pleasant laugh interrupted her, and turning round Nora became aware that the occupant of a smart high-wheeled dog-cart drawn up close beside them was listening to her with a face of much amusement.

"How do you do, Mrs. Fleming?" said Nora instantly. "I see you have those special sort of springs that I was talking about on your dog-cart too."

"No, I have not, Nora," said Mrs. Fleming, refusing, with a shake of her head and a merry laugh, to be implicated in Nora's extravagant tale. "This is the same humdrum old dog-cart that it ever was, and we shall jog along the road in the ordinary way."

"I believe you are only joking after all," Frances exclaimed, with a pout. "I never can tell when you are speaking the truth and when you are not, Nora."

"Of course you can't, when I don't want you to," returned Nora complacently. "But look, Frances, your father is signalling to you; you had better be off. The child looks well on horseback, doesn't she?" added Miss Nora, as the subject of this remark, who was at least three or four years older than herself, cantered up the road towards her father.

"Yes, she has a good seat," said Mrs. Fleming, whose eyes were also following Frances's neat, trim figure in its well-fitting habit. "But, poor girl, it is an open secret that she dislikes hunting. She hasn't the nerve or the strength for it, although Mr. Keble hopes that both will come in time."

"Which just shows," remarked Miss Nora, who, as her brother Tom had once said, never felt herself unequal to joining in any conversation, and would have aired her opinions on politics with a prime minister, and on military tactics with a field-marshal without any diffidence whatsoever—"which just shows how foolish our worthy M.F.H. is. Nerve isn't a thing that can be got by practice, or courage either. Now, if Mr. Keble would give Ethel



"The child looks well on horseback, doesn't she?"

and me a mount and his own daughter a bicycle, I should think all the better of him."

"Perhaps he mightn't consider the bribe high enough," suggested Mrs. Fleming, with a laugh. "Well, I am going round to the other side of the wood. If the hounds find at once—and they say the wood is full of cubs—the whole field will be over the hill in less than five minutes after the start, and we shall see nothing."

And nodding to the two girls, and just touching the high-spirited horse she was driving with her whip, Mrs. Fleming passed on, leaving the space in front of the gateway clear for any one else who desired to exchange a word with Miss Dunmayne and Miss Nora Anstruther. And there were plenty of people who wished to do so, and they were one and all anxious to know why Miss Dunmayne was not on horseback.

"Well, I have never seen you at a meet before on foot, Miss Ethel," said old Colonel Baines, as he trotted by on his stout cob—"or," with a disparaging glance at her bicycle, "on worse than foot. Have you given up riding in favour of tennis?"

Ethel laughed and shook her head. There was no opportunity to enter into explanations, for the cob declined to wait for them, and he and his master were out of hearing immediately.

The next person to speak to them was young Mrs. Scott, the keenest hunting woman in the county. Her husband was a millionaire, and her stables were full of thoroughbred hunters.

"Why, Ethel," she exclaimed, reining up the beautiful animal she rode, "and not riding! How is this? I heard you had made up your mind to lead the field once you had left school, and to teach us all the proper way to hunt."

"The person who told you that was very silly," said Ethel, with her usual bluntness, and far from guessing that Mrs. Scott had made up the speech herself on the spur of the moment. "I never said anything so absurd."

"They do say," observed Nora, "that one should never believe anything one hears—not things, at any rate, that are unfavourable to the person under discussion."

"Oh, do they, indeed, you impertinent child!" exclaimed Mrs. Scott good-humouredly. "And may I ask why you are not at your lessons? I saw you at the meet on Wednesday, I think, and on Monday too."

"I think you must have the rest of the quotation," said Nora, a mischievous smile radiating her pert little face in a way which somehow contrived to rob her manner of any real offence—"the bit that tells you only to believe half of what you see. And at that rate you know you only saw me on Monday."

So, partly owing to the love that Nora had for the sound of her own voice, and partly to the fact that, with the hounds starting any moment, few people had time to stop and wait for an answer to the questions and exclamations they threw at her in passing, Ethel was not called upon to enter into particulars as to why she was mounted on a bicycle and not on a horse. And in spite of the

disparaging grunt that Colonel Baines had given as he glanced at their machines, both Ethel and Nora managed to get a day of thorough enjoyment. Ethel's knowledge of the surrounding country was extensive and accurate. She knew every lane and by-way, and negotiated the most improbable-looking short-cuts with so much success that, although they did not, as Nora afterwards declared to be the case, keep the hounds in view the whole way, they never lost touch with them, and twice during the run only just prevented themselves from heading off the fox.

But though she was evidently extracting a fair share of enjoyment out of the day's run, the fact that she was not riding excited a good deal of comment. Ethel's keenness for hunting was a matter of common knowledge throughout the neighbourhood; she had spoken openly of the horses she meant to keep when she left school, and though such talk might have sounded absurd in any other girl, Ethel was not in the position of an ordinary girl. The heiress to a fortune of five thousand pounds a year might reasonably expect to be able to hunt as much as she pleased.

"I wonder if she really is as rich as they say she is," Mrs. Scott remarked to Mrs. Fleming as they drove home in the latter's dog-cart.

Mrs. Scott's horse had fallen lame early in the afternoon; she had missed the groom who had brought out her second mount; and finally had been glad to avail herself of the proffered seat in Mrs. Fleming's dog-cart.

"Oh yes, she is rich enough," returned Mrs. Fleming. "My brother-in-law is solicitor to the Aylewood estate, and it, with the money invested in consols which the late Mr. Dunmayne left, brings in to its fortunate possessor close on five thousand pounds a year."

"A fortunate girl, indeed," echoed Mrs. Scott. "Unless," she added, struck by an afterthought, "Sir Laurence has been making ducks and drakes of the money all this time—speculating in unsound shares, and so forth, you know."

"Sir Laurence is the last man in the world to speculate with other people's money," returned Mrs. Fleming. "Besides, even if he had been doing what you suggest, he could not touch the capital, which is very firmly tied up, and absolutely settled upon Ethel."

"Then how account for his present conduct?" said Mrs. Scott. "That it is not of her own free will that Ethel abstains from hunting it is easy to see. Her eyes, which fixed themselves wistfully on every horse that passed her, told one that. I believe if I had offered to change steeds with her this morning she would have accepted the offer like a shot, and mounted my Bonny Boy without caring a fig for the fact that she was wearing a bicycling skirt."

Mrs. Fleming laughed. "A year or two ago she certainly would, but I think she has a little more regard for appearances now. Have you made the acquaintance of her step-aunt and her cousin yet?"

"Mrs. and Miss Nugent! Yes, indeed, I have," answered Mrs. Scott. "I had the pleasure of talking to Miss Violet

for nearly ten minutes, and her affectations bored me extremely. And I am afraid I let her know it."

"Silly girl! She will grow out of them," said Mrs. Fleming, more leniently. "Her mother took my fancy greatly. But I think she is in bad health, and either that or some other cause renders her very low-spirited. From what I can make out she was very well off indeed at one time; and then her husband, who was a business man, lost all his money and finally died, leaving her very badly off. Now, it is my idea that perhaps it is because Sir Laurence does not wish to accentuate the difference in the respective fortunes of his two nieces that he does not encourage Ethel to launch out into expenditure of any kind."

"Yes, that may be it," Mrs. Scott said thoughtfully. "After all, it will do Miss Ethel no harm to be kept in the background a year or two longer. She has an excellent opinion of herself as it is. I wonder how she and her cousin agree. One never sees them about together."

"Their tastes are very different," said Mrs. Fleming. "Ethel is essentially an outdoor, her cousin an indoor girl. And I believe, by the way, she has great artistic abilities."

"So Mrs. Nugent gave me to understand," said Mrs. Scott, with a laugh that was not quite kind. "Europe is to ring with Violet's name in the future."

"Meanwhile," interrupted Mrs. Fleming, "it is much on the lips of Lady Newman; and to have brought it there is no mean achievement for a girl of eighteen. Lady Newman chanced to see a water-colour sketch of Dan Martin's little girl that she had done, and she was

so charmed with it that she bought it on the spot, and paid ten guineas for it too. I have seen it, and although I cannot aspire to the prophetic eye which Lady Newman possesses, and which is said to have the power of detecting geniuses in their very earliest bud, I can at any rate see that it is a capital likeness, and an exceedingly pretty sketch into the bargain."

Mrs. Fleming was not overstating the case when she said that it was no mean achievement for any young artist to have won the approval of Lady Newman. Her husband had been a well-known collector of pictures, and his widow, who had ample means, derived what was almost her chief pleasure in life by adding to his collection. Nor did Lady Newman's interest in Violet stop there. A great friend of hers, a rising young artist, had lately come to reside at Torleigh, having by his doctor's orders left London for some months. It was through Lady Newman's persuasion that he and his wife had taken a furnished house in her neighbourhood, she having promised not only to make the period of their exile as happy as she could, but to provide him with some pupils. As soon as she had seen Violet's work she felt sure that she would prove a pupil who would do Mr. Tristram credit, and whom he would feel a pleasure in teaching. And as Sir Laurence was only too willing for his niece to resume her art studies, and as Violet was eager to set to work again, she and her uncle went with Lady Newman to call upon Mr. Tristram to make all the necessary arrangements for her to attend his studio. It was settled

that on three mornings a week she should work with him, while on the alternate days she was to paint and draw in her own studio, and she settled down to work with a steady zeal that promised well.

Meanwhile, Ethel in her own way was as fully occupied as her cousin. Despite the fact that the November days were cold and wet, she was generally out from breakfast until tea-time. Golf and hockey and riding were her three chief amusements, now that tennis and boating were over, and it had to be a drenching day indeed that would keep her indoors. Of an ordinary Devonshire drizzle she took no notice at all; and while Mrs. Nugent sat by a blazing fire in the drawing-room, and Violet worked away with an equally big one in her studio, Ethel, with a rough tweed cap on her head, a short skirt reaching to her ankles only, was walking over the golf links or rushing across the muddy hockey field.

Nor was she altogether debarred from her favourite pastime of hunting. Sir Laurence had carried out his intention of giving her a horse, and Jack had been definitely replaced by a nice-looking mare, who, though she could not lay claim to be one of the thoroughbred hunters which Ethel had been so keen to possess, was yet a good, serviceable animal, and clever, too, at her fences. So that though Ethel could not hunt more than once a week, she was fain to be content with that once, and was far too sensible to let her enjoyment of it be spoiled by the thought that she could not go out oftener. So in their different ways both Sir Laurence's nieces were fully occupied during the

first months of winter, and December was upon them before they had well realized that November had begun.

The dance which Sir Laurence had spoken of giving in the autumn had been postponed, after all, until the Christmas holidays, so that Wilfrid, who had not been able to get away from the office when he had expected, might be present at it. He came down about the second week in December, and he and Ethel soon became very good friends indeed. Ethel was, as a matter of fact, agreeably surprised in him. She had heard so much about him of late from Mrs. Nugent, who spoke of him always in terms of such extravagant praise, that she had been prepared to find him a prig. He proved, on the contrary, a nice, unaffected boy, good-tempered, ready to be amused at anything or to do anything she chose. Both his mother and his sister were very proud of him; they made no secret of their conviction that he was the handsomest, cleverest, altogether most charming son and brother that any mother or sister ever possessed. And the only wonder was that his head was not turned by all the flattering things they said to him. But he took it all very quietly. Only now and again—as, for instance, when one day soon after his arrival they were discussing the forthcoming dance, and Violet told him before Ethel that she was positive that his dancing would be better than that of any other man in the room—he broke into a boyish laugh and begged her to spare his blushes.

But Violet was so truly fond of him that she even rose superior to one of her besetting faults where he was con-

cerned, and would not permit herself to feel jealous when he went off with Ethel to share in her outdoor pursuits instead of remaining in the house with his sister, who, as Mr. Tristram had gone away to spend his Christmas in the south of France, had plenty of time on her hands. She even made a valiant attempt to go round the links with them on a drizzling day of rain, and to try and look as if she were enjoying herself as much as they were. But when she learnt that they had curtailed their play—the suggestion that they should do so came from Wilfrid, and was not very cordially acted upon by Ethel—in order to cut short her period of misery, she was full of self-reproach at the thought that she had spoilt Wilfrid's enjoyment, and took care not to go with him again unless the day was exceptionally fine.

Sir Laurence also took a great liking to his step-nephew, who, in spite of his two-and-twenty years, was little more than a boy, and he felt inclined to agree with his sister that it was a pity that so far his prospects in life were so poor.

"A clerk, a mere clerk," said Mrs. Nugent, with tears in her eyes, "with a pitiful salary of ninety pounds a year."

It was a wet afternoon; so hopelessly wet that even Ethel had abandoned all idea of going out, and was writing a note to the Anstruthers, asking them to come up and play ping-pong and badminton in the hall, and pending their arrival Wilfrid was loitering in the drawing-room with his mother and uncle.

"Come now, mother," said Wilfrid cheerfully, "I will

not have you call me a pitiful clerk. And let me tell you that if I threw up my post to-morrow, there are a hundred, perhaps double that number, of fellows who would be only too jolly thankful to step into my shoes. But I shan't always be a clerk, mother, so don't fret."

There was a certain significance in his tone that caught his mother's quick ears, and she insisted on his explaining what he meant.

"You have some plan in your head, I can see," she exclaimed. "But I might have known that my Wilfrid would not be content to sit on an office stool all his life, but would carve his way to fame and fortune."

And Mrs. Nugent gazed proudly at her son, who, for his part, threw back his head and laughed in the boyish, light-hearted way habitual to him when his mother indulged in those rhapsodies concerning him. Yet, in spite of his amusement, there was never any want of respect in his manner, and his mother generally ended by joining in the laugh against herself.

"No, I shall never carve my way to fame and fortune," Wilfrid said, when he had done laughing. "But I may—mind, mother, I don't say so for certain—but I may end by becoming a highly-eminent and respectable solicitor. Now, please, mother, don't go and write to Uncle Tom and ask him what his intentions towards me are, for that would just spoil everything. But I think he means to have me articled to him next year, and without asking you for a single penny as premium."

"I am very glad to hear that is the case; but what

makes you think it is, Wilfrid?" asked Sir Laurence. "Has your uncle given you any hint of his intentions?"

"Not in so many words; but I have felt lately that his eye is constantly on me. It always has been more or less upon me ever since I entered the office," he added ruefully. "If I was three minutes late, and another fellow five, I was sure to get the most slating."

"But I hope, as a rule, you are punctual," Sir Laurence said. "No strict business man will put up with unpunctuality."

"Uncle Tom won't, at any rate. Oh yes, Uncle Laurence, I am very punctual now. It took me some months to get into the way of it, I own; and when I look back now and see the casual sort of chap I was when I first went to him, I'm surprised that Uncle Tom ever kept me in the office. He could have got a better clerk than I was at half the money he paid me."

"Indeed, he could not," protested Mrs. Nugent indignantly. "How could he expect to get a better clerk than his own nephew?"

"As a nephew I was always nice," said Wilfrid, with a twinkle in his eye, "but as a clerk I could have been improved upon. However, the point is that I hope not to be a clerk much longer. But whatever you do, mother, don't go and write to Uncle Tom and ask him if he means to have me articled to him or not. I know as well as anything that if you did, he would just write back and say 'No.' He likes to work things his own way, and if one tries to hurry him it just gets his back up, and there you are, you know."

Mrs. Nugent disclaimed all idea of writing to her brother-in-law ; and when Wilfrid had left the room, which he did in response to a call from Ethel, Sir Laurence observed that what the boy had said was probably right. Mr. Nugent did intend to do something for him, but being a man of peculiar temperament, he liked to manage matters without interference from outside.

"You may well say he's got a peculiar temper," said Mrs. Nugent ; and although that was not exactly what her brother had said, he allowed it to pass unchallenged. "If he had been like any one else, he would have made Wilfrid an articulated pupil, or whatever it is, long ago."

"Well, I am not sure that Mr. Nugent has not handled the boy wisely, after all," Sir Laurence said musingly. "From what I can gather, he was not fitted at the time of his father's death for a business life, was he?"

"Indeed, no!" said Mrs. Nugent, with some dignity. "A business life was the last thing we thought of for him. He was to have gone first to the university, then to have travelled for a couple of years, and then, if he had liked, to have made a choice of a profession. There was no need at all for him to work in the strict sense of the word."

"Exactly," said Sir Laurence, with a whimsical smile. "Well, to take a boy of his weak and rather easily-led disposition, one who had always been allowed plenty of pocket-money, plenty of liberty, and who hardly knew the meaning of the word 'work,' and expect him to apply himself seriously to work would have been the way to

court failure. Mr. Nugent evidently saw this, and his first step was to impress upon him the idea that his prospects were altered indeed, and that in future he would have to work for his living instead of having it provided for him. No half measure would have been sufficient. Articled pupils get no salary. If Wilfrid had been articled to his uncle to begin with, either you or your brother-in-law would have had to give him an allowance to live upon, and he would have missed the salutary effect which the sense of having earned his own living for the past few years has given him. Besides, now he will appreciate at its proper value the prospect of one day becoming his uncle's partner, whereas then, in comparison with the easy life of pleasure he had expected to lead, it would probably have appeared anything but desirable in his eyes."

"Perhaps you are right, Laurence," his sister said, with a sigh. "You must own, though, that Wilfrid has been a dear, good boy. Never once has he grumbled at our loss of fortune or at having to sit all day in a musty office, but has taken his lot as cheerfully as possible."

"I do own that he is a good boy," Sir Laurence said heartily, "and has well earned his promotion. And now, Isabel, you look very tired. I notice you are not taking your afternoon nap since Wilfrid has been here. Why is that?"

"I didn't want to distress him by letting him see what a hopeless invalid I am becoming," Mrs. Nugent answered, with rather a pathetic smile. "Besides, now that the

days are colder, and I go out less, I don't need so much rest. I shall probably get a nap here by the fireside."

"I will not have you call yourself a hopeless invalid," said Sir Laurence. "You will be all right again, I think, after that operation in the spring, and stronger than you have been for many years."

It was unhappily true that symptoms of the disease from which the doctor feared Mrs. Nugent was suffering had during the past few months become aggravated. She had, unknown even to Violet, or to any one but her brother, whom she afterwards told, consulted a specialist in her complaint in London, and he had confirmed the fears that the Montreal doctor had entertained, but had said that an operation would be impossible for another thirteen or fourteen months. It was on the evening of Ethel's first arrival at home that Mrs. Nugent, under a strict pledge of secrecy, had taken Sir Laurence into her confidence, and he had been so shocked and grieved at the news of her grave illness that it was small wonder that he had had scant attention to give his niece. Sir Laurence had wished his sister to tell Violet, at least, of her ailment, but it was from her daughter almost more than any one else that Mrs. Nugent wished the truth withheld.

"Why should I cause a shadow to fall across her bright, young life?" she asked. "She will know quite soon enough."

So Mrs. Nugent bore her trouble alone, facing the ordeal that lay before her with a quiet courage that

would have won Ethel's admiration and respect had she only known of it. But then she did not know; and Ethel, in the sweeping manner characteristic of her, had already summed her aunt up as an indolent, rather feeble sort of person, kind enough, it was true, but not very wise.

While Mrs. Nugent dozed that wet afternoon before the fire in the drawing-room, a ping-pong tournament was in progress in the hall. The four Anstruthers and a friend of Godfrey's, another young medical student, responded to Ethel's invitation; and, as the best means of ensuring a fair share of play to every one, a small American tournament had been organized. It was in full swing when tea came in; and though play was resumed immediately afterwards, it was not until the first gong went that the finals, in which Godfrey and Ethel were the combatants, were played off, leaving Godfrey the winner by exactly two points.

"I believe you must play all day long at the hospital to be able to beat Ethel," Nora cried, who, with the rest of the party, had been following the game with keen interest. "And if Buns hadn't got in the way as she was running round the table, you wouldn't have got nineteen all, and as Ethel won the next point the game would have been hers."

"Well, I offered to have it a let," said Godfrey. "It's rather too bad, you know, to publicly depreciate me in this way, and knock all the joy and glory of beating Ethel out of me."

"Yes; shut up, Nora," said Ethel. "Godfrey's service

is better than mine; it's so good, in fact, that I expect there's a lot of truth in what you say, and that he does spend his time playing ping-pong instead of attending to his patients."

"Hadn't you all better stay to dinner?" said Sir Laurence, coming out of his study at that moment. "The rain has cleared off a little, and probably you would have a nice walk home later on."

"Oh, I wish we could," said Nora; "but mother has asked some people called Chester to dine with us, and I am afraid it would not do if we weren't there."

"Well, hardly, perhaps," said Sir Laurence, with a smile.

"But I tell you what," Nora said, eagerly turning towards Ethel. "Why shouldn't you three come down to us this evening? Do, and you can help us to entertain the Chesters. They are almost strangers to us, and we shan't know what to do with them. They are friends," Nora went on to explain, "of the Williamses, the two girls who stayed with us in the summer, and they are only here for a short time, and they asked us to be kind to them, and so we asked them to dinner. They said they were very nice. Oh yes," as Ethel began to laugh, "don't criticise my grammar. I know I have mixed up my 'theys' and 'thems' a bit; but you can understand what I mean, and that is all that matters. But you haven't said whether you are coming or not."

"You haven't given me a chance so far to get in a word," Ethel retorted. "But I'll come for one. What do you two say?"

Wilfrid signified his intention of accompanying his cousin, and Violet, hearing that the carriage was to be sent, said she would also go.

"There," said Wilfrid, coming back into the hall after seeing Nora and her escort off, "just see how ready I am to sacrifice myself to the insatiable desire you two girls have for amusement. Left to myself, I would have passed a profitable evening studying some of those law works I brought down with me."

"Then you shall be left to yourself," exclaimed Ethel. "Violet and I can go quite nicely alone, and you shall read your old law books to your heart's content."

Wilfrid heaved a tremendous sigh. "Would that I might," he said. "But no! my conscience would not permit such selfishness. I could not be happy at home knowing that I had failed so lamentably in my duty as a cousin and a brother."

In that statement, however, Ethel and Violet placed no more faith than it deserved, and the three cousins separated to dress for dinner.

There was only one postal delivery at Nutcombe during the day, and that was in the morning; but Sir Laurence usually sent a man into Torleigh in the afternoon to fetch any letters that might have come during the day, and which, if not called for, would be kept for delivery on the following day. He usually returned about seven; but if, as not unfrequently happened, the London train was late, he waited for it.

This evening, partly owing to the fact that Christmas

was close at hand and the lines blocked with extra traffic, the letters did not come until they were half way through dinner.

"One for you, Isabel," said Sir Laurence, opening the bag, and distributing its contents, "four for myself, one for Wilfrid, one for Ethel; none, I am afraid, for you, Violet."

"Mine is from Ida," said Ethel presently, looking across the table to Sir Laurence. "She says that they are booked to appear at Barnstow on the twenty-second of January. I am glad. You haven't forgotten that I am to go and stay with her for a week, have you, Uncle Laurie? She is looking forward to it immensely—as much, and far more than I can be, she says."

"No, I have not forgotten," Sir Laurence answered. "You must keep yourself free for that week. I will make a note of it also, and will go over one day with Violet, and your aunt too if she cares to come, and see Miss Ida act. There is almost sure to be a matinee, I should think. You would like to go, Violet, wouldn't you?"

Violet gave an eager assent, and Wilfrid said in reproving accents that it was too bad of them to make plans for future gaieties in his hearing, knowing as they did that he would be grinding away again in London long before the twenty-second.

"When must you go back, Wilfrid?" Sir Laurence asked his nephew.

"On the fifth, Uncle Laurence; for punctually at 9 a.m.

on the sixth I must report myself at the office. But, thank goodness, that date is as yet far distant, and all sorts of jolly things are to happen first."

"Including this evening's entertainment at the Anstruthers," said Ethel, folding up her letter and putting it in her pocket. "I wonder what we shall do? Last Christmas we played hide-and-seek over the house, and it was capital fun until—"

"Hide-and-seek over the house!" ejaculated Violet, in amazement. "But that is a child's game. I haven't played it since I was ten."

"And looked down upon it then," chimed in Wilfrid. "But that won't be allowed now. None of your grown-up airs with me, miss. If your brother, a hard-working solicitor that is to be, can play hide-and-seek, so can you."

"Don't be frightened, Violet," Ethel said, laughing at the resigned expression that had come over Violet's face. "I don't think there will be any hide-and-seek, really. As I was about to explain when you interrupted me, Harold set fire to the muslin frills of a dressing-table by looking underneath it with a lighted candle in his hand; and after that Mrs. Anstruther stopped the game, and said that in future she could only allow it to be played in her house in the daytime."

"I should think so, indeed, after that," Mrs. Nugent said, with a shudder. "I have a horror of fire."

"So we shall probably play ping-pong again," added Ethel.

"Ping-pong rather palls upon one when one has played it for some hours running," said Violet.

"You will be a poetess before you know where you are," said her brother, "if you alliterate so recklessly. 'Ping-pong palls,' pursued the poor poetess profoundly perplexed—perplexed—"

But there Wilfrid stuck, and Ethel advised him to have recourse to a dictionary if he wanted to round off his sentence neatly.

The Anstruthers, unlike Violet, were of the opinion that it was impossible to have too much of a good thing, and as the Chesters were keen ping-pongers also, the game was soon in full swing again in the big airy schoolroom in which, Harold was heard explaining to the others, Nora, when not otherwise engaged, condescended to do lessons for an hour or so with Miss Morris.

Mrs. Anstruther, who was a charming, kindly woman—one, moreover, who looked absurdly young to be the mother of three great boys and a tall slip of a girl like Nora—accompanied them up to the schoolroom, but declined, although she was given the best place and all the cushions in the room, to stay there long, and soon took her departure, leaving the young people to themselves.

Miss Chester was a nice-looking girl of about two-and-twenty, with a merry laugh and gay manner, and was evidently as full of high spirits and fun as any one of the Anstruthers, with whom she already appeared to be on very friendly terms. Her brother was much quieter in his manner. He was tall and fair, and looked a year

or two younger than his sister. He looked rather closely at Ethel when he was introduced to her, and seemed about to speak; but before he could do more than shake hands with her he found himself being introduced to Violet, and then to Wilfrid, and by the time he had shaken hands with them also Ethel was surrounded by a group of Anstruthers. But his eyes followed her about with some interest, and as soon as he got a chance he crossed the room and sat down beside her.

"I wanted to ask you if you are any relation to a fellow I know of your name?" he asked. "Hugh Dunmayne is my best friend. We were at Cheltenham and Woolwich together; and it is such an uncommon name that I think you must be related to him."

"Yes, I am," said Ethel, glancing at young Chester with some interest, for he was the first person she had ever come across who had known any of her Aylewood cousins. "Hugh Dunmayne is my second cousin. I have only seen him once in my life, though, and that was when I was quite a little girl. But you don't mean to say," she added, in some surprise, "that you were at Woolwich with him? I should have thought—"

"What? that Chester was still at school?" laughed Godfrey, who, overhearing Ethel's remark as he passed, stopped with the mischievous desire of witnessing her confusion. "You are as bad ■■ Nora, who asked him at dinner how long his holidays were going to last. Why, Chester has only just come back from South Africa, where he has been fighting for his king and country for the

last eighteen months. I do believe you would have asked him in another moment what form he was in."

"Have you really been out in South Africa?" Ethel asked, ignoring Godfrey's chaff, who, being called upon at that moment to play, had to keep anything further he had to say until a future occasion. Now that she looked more attentively at young Chester, she saw that he might well be older than on a first impression he might appear.

"Yes, but I am sorry to say I saw absolutely no fighting. I had the bad luck to put my knee out soon after I landed, so I was put on to the line of communications, and there I stuck. But, of course, you know how well Hugh has done. He was recommended for the V.C. a week after he landed. Quick work that, wasn't it? He has got his D.S.O., too, and his captaincy. Not bad that for a fellow who isn't quite twenty-five, eh?"

"I should think it wasn't," said Ethel. "I have heard about the V.C., of course; but I didn't know he had got his D.S.O., or that he was a captain already. What is he like?" she added. "Is he nice? But, of course, as you are his best friend, you would think he was at any rate."

"Why, there is no doubt about that at all!" young Chester cried, in such emphatic tones that they were heard even above the babel of talk and laughter and the clatter of ping-pong balls. "He is the best chap in the world."

Miss Chester looked across to her brother and Ethel and laughed. "It is easy to guess whom Bertie is talking

about," she said. "He thinks there is no one as nice as Captain Dunmayne."

"He has got a dreadfully bad temper, hasn't he?" said Ethel, recalling the childish incident that had taken place years ago in the sunny garden at the back of the quaint old High Street of Aylewood. Perceiving that he looked as if he would like to hear what had suggested that remark, she described the visit she had paid as a child to Aylewood, and the way in which she had quarrelled with her cousins.

"And so that jolly old place, Aylewood Manor, belongs to you?" Mr. Chester said, in some surprise. "I thought it had passed out of the Dunmayne family altogether somehow. I know it belonged to them once, but some people called Jones have it now."

"They only rent it," Ethel explained. "But I am such a stranger to my cousins, and the Joneses have had the place on such a long lease, that everybody thinks they will always be there. But tell me more about my cousins; I have never met any one before who knew them, and I should like to hear about them."

"I stayed with them nearly the whole of one summer holidays when my people happened to be abroad, and I had a ripping time. Mrs. Dunmayne was awfully kind to me, but I must own that I stood in tremendous awe of her. She was such a cold, proud-looking woman, with such a stern manner that I don't think even her own daughters were quite at their ease with her. The only person who was not afraid of her was her son Hugh,

and those two were just awfully fond of one another. Hugh made no secret of the fact that he thought there was no one in the world like his mother; and though she was not so outspoken about him, any one who looked below the surface could see that she just idolized him."

"There was another boy, wasn't there?" asked Ethel—"the youngest of the family."

"Yes, Dicky. It was awfully sad about him, poor chap. He wanted to go into the Navy, but Mrs. Dunmayne wouldn't let him. I can't think why, for two or three years later, when he was too old for the *Britannia*, of course, she didn't refuse her consent to his going into the merchant service. And he was drowned, poor fellow, on his very first voyage to Australia. He fell off the rigging into the sea, and though they lowered a boat and picked him up, they couldn't bring him back to consciousness, and he died a few hours afterwards. It was a terrible blow to his mother, as you can imagine, and I don't think she has quite got over it. Dicky went to sea two or three years after the summer I stayed at Aylewood, and a couple of years or so later I went down just for a week-end, and I noticed a great change in Mrs. Dunmayne. She had always, as I said, been a cold and rather frigid person, but then she appeared absolutely frozen up. And there was a sort of gloom and silence about the house that was awfully depressing."

"And what are the girls like?" asked Ethel.

"Well, I haven't seen them since the first time I stayed there, for when I ran down for the week-end I spoke

of they were both away; but I know as a boy I liked them both immensely. Not that they took very much notice of me, though. Hugh was everything in their eyes, and there was nothing they would not have done for him."

"He had them in capital order, I remember," said Ethel. "They simply did exactly what he told them."

"Still talking about the Dunmaynes?" said Miss Chester, seating herself on the other side of Ethel. "I know Bertie has often wished that I had as proper an idea of what was due to him as an elder brother as the Dunmaynes have towards their brother."

Then Ethel got up to play, and when she had finished it was young Chester's turn to play with some one else, so that it was some little time before they found an opportunity to resume their conversation. But as Ethel was frankly interested in her cousins, she questioned him a good deal further concerning them during the course of the evening; and Bertie Chester, nothing loath, launched into anecdotes of all that he had done during the summer holidays he had spent at Aylewood, and then told her how popular Hugh had been at Cheltenham and at Woolwich, and again with his brother-officers, and how it was pretty generally supposed that he would rise high in his profession.

"I remember I used to think that it was an awful pity that the fine old place had passed out of their family," he said. "Hugh is just the sort of fellow who ought to be the owner of a jolly place like that; and Mrs. Dunmayne, too, always had the air of a lady who

ought to have carriages and horses and a big establishment of her own. She would have been just in her place as mistress of Aylewood."

"Only that the place happens to belong to me," said Ethel, with an amused smile. "And I am afraid that, even for the sake of obliging my cousins, I cannot give it up to them. But now you speak of it, I wonder what relation they are to me exactly. Second cousins, I believe. So it is a little muddling to follow up, but we had the same great-grandfather of course, and then my grandfather inherited Aylewood, while their grandfather, his brother, founded their branch of the family. So that, after all, you see, one can scarcely say that the place passed away from them, for they never had it; they are just a younger branch of the family."

"Yes, I see that now," Mr. Chester said. "I don't quite know why, for they never spoke about it, but I had an idea, somehow, that the property had been willed away from them. It is certainly curious how I got that idea," he went on, in a musing tone, "for, of course, it must be a wrong one. Anyway, it seems an awful pity that Hugh belongs to the younger branch, doesn't it?"

"Well, you can hardly expect me to be sorry for that, Mr. Chester," Ethel said, her eyes dancing with amusement. "I don't think it's a pity at all that it is I, and not my cousin Hugh, who owns Aylewood. But I think," she added, "that it is rather a pity that I know so little of them, especially as you say they are all so nice."

Chapter VIII.

AN EXCITING INCIDENT.

“**U**NCLE LAURIE,” said Ethel the next morning, “don’t you think it is rather odd that the Aylewood Dunmaynes and I should be such strangers to one another? Excepting you, of course, they are the only relations I have on my father’s side, aren’t they? And I have been thinking that you might write and ask the girls to come down here on a visit. I am sure they would like to come.”

It was a fine, frosty morning, and though there was a keen east wind blowing, it had cleared away the clouds of the day before, and the sun shone out of a sky so blue that it would have done no discredit to a June day.

Ethel and Sir Laurence were on their way to the farm. After a day spent in the house Ethel was always more than usually eager to escape into the fresh air; and although she had promised to go with Wilfrid later in the morning to Bannister Park, and learn what prospect, if any, there was of skating in the immediate future, she had jumped at the chance of a walk up to the farm first of all. Breakfast had not been altogether a pleasant meal that morning. Sir Laurence, absorbed

in his letters and papers, had observed nothing amiss with the tempers of his two nieces and nephew; but Violet had been sulky, Wilfrid argumentative, and Ethel impatient with them both. Wilfrid had started the discussion by comparing, considerably to his sister's disadvantage, Ethel's love of exercise in all weathers, to Violet's love of staying indoors; and Violet, rendered cross by the cold which she suspected of having given her nose a tinge of redness, had not taken his remarks in good part.

"I'm certain you'd feel ever so much better if you took the regular exercise that Ethel does," pursued Wilfrid, with more brotherly candour than tact. "Why, you don't look half as fresh and fit as she does this morning. Just think now of the different way in which you two mean to spend your morning. Ethel is going up to the farm first of all, and then over to Bannister Park, and this afternoon we are going to play golf. And what are you going to do?—stop in the house all day, I know."

"No, I'm not, then," said Violet crossly. "I'm going for a walk by myself. No," as Wilfrid said she had better come to Bannister Park with them; "you both walk far too fast for me. I prefer to go by myself."

And from that resolve nothing Wilfrid could say could move her. Ethel did not try. She saw that Violet had come down in a bad humour, and it never occurred to her to attempt to coax her out of it. Besides, it was true that Violet could not walk as fast as they could. Ethel

had long ago come to the conclusion that Violet did not know the meaning of a brisk walk that sent the blood tingling through one's veins. A gentle saunter, with frequent pauses by gates and stiles, was Violet's idea of a walk, and as often as not she would plead fatigue or cold, and want to turn back before half the proposed distance was accomplished. Ethel could not understand that Violet, though she fought against the feeling, was jealous of the preference that Wilfrid, merely because they shared so many outdoor tastes, showed for the society of his cousin; nor, truth to say, had Ethel understood the feeling, would she have had much patience with it. She would only have thought that Violet was very silly and petty-minded, and dismissed the matter with a shrug of her shoulders. With the very best of intentions, but with most unfortunate results, Wilfrid proceeded to expatiate on the different results which their respective modes of existence must produce on both of them. Ethel, he maintained, must benefit in every way by her healthy, outdoor life, while Violet must grow pale and delicate from staying indoors so much.

"Why," went on Wilfrid, growing more interested in the discussion than, truth to say, were either of his two listeners, "it must even make a difference in your characters in time. Indoor people are always timid and nervous, and full of all sorts of little aches and pains, while outdoor people aren't afraid of anything, but are always strong, self-reliant, and courageous."

"Rather a sweeping remark that," said Ethel, helping herself to strawberry jam and Devonshire cream with a liberality that bespoke a healthy appetite at all events.

"Not a bit of it," asserted Wilfrid, with a twinkle in his eyes, nevertheless, that bespoke a desire to tease his sister. "Why, would you believe it, we were crossing a field the other day, and Violet wanted to go half a mile round to escape a pack of harmless cows that were quietly grazing in a corner! Now, if that wasn't rank cowardice, I would like to know what is. And it springs, as I say, from not taking enough outdoor exercise."

Violet never took chaff well. Sometimes she took it worse than at others. And this morning, not being in a good temper to start with, she chose to accept everything Wilfrid said in all seriousness, and to become much annoyed with him in consequence. During the rest of the meal she would scarcely speak, but sat in sulky silence, brooding over the accusation of cowardice that had been brought against her. She was miserable as well as sulky. She valued Wilfrid's good opinion more than the good opinion of any one else; and much as she disliked all forms of outdoor games, she would have played them as assiduously as she worked at her painting, had there been the least chance of her ever being the slightest good at them. All things considered, then, Ethel was more than usually glad to escape from the breakfast-room that morning; and as soon as she was fairly started on her walk with her uncle, she began to

question him about her Aylewood cousins, who, since her conversation with young Chester the night before, had occupied a large share of her thoughts. An interchange of visits would, she had come to the conclusion, be the most satisfactory way of renewing acquaintance with them.

"I expect," she went on, as Sir Laurence did not reply immediately to her remark, "that we should get on very well with each other. As they have been brought up in the country, they are sure to like the same things that I like, and be as fond of riding and hunting and games as I am. So we are sure to get on; and as we shall be such near neighbours one day, and as we are cousins, we ought to be friends too."

"You ought to be friends too," repeated Sir Laurence. They were skirting the edge of a ploughed field at the moment, and he paused and looked in a contemplative manner at the long, pyramidal shaped pile of mangel-wurzels that were heaped up on one side of the field.

"Why, uncle," Ethel exclaimed, in reproachful astonishment, "I don't believe you have been listening."

"Indeed I have, my dear," he answered, walking on. "You were asking me about your cousins, the Aylewood Dunmaynes, and whether I did not think it would be a good plan to ask them down here."

"Well, don't you?" Ethel interrupted.

"Well, no, Ethel; I cannot say that I would consider your doing so advisable, for the simple reason that I know very well that they would not accept the invitation."

"Not accept it!" Ethel cried in astonishment. "But why not, Uncle Laurie? Don't they like me? They usedn't to, I know, but they can hardly be so silly as to remember our childish quarrel. And I am not likely to annoy them by bragging about being heiress of Aylewood now."

She ended with a little laugh in which Sir Laurence did not join. His face wore a grave, rather abstracted look.

"There isn't a deadly feud or anything of that sort between us, is there?" Ethel asked suddenly, a glimmer of amusement in her eyes.

"No, no," Sir Laurence said hastily. "What put such an idea into your head, my dear?" he added.

"Why, of course, it was not there really," Ethel said, a little surprised at the effect her careless remark had caused. "I was only joking. But why do you think they wouldn't come, Uncle Laurie?"

"Well, I asked the two girls once before, some years ago now, when they and you were much younger, but Mrs. Dunmayne refused the invitation for them."

"Oh, well," said Ethel, "because they would not come then, that is no reason for supposing that they would not come now, is it? Perhaps they were engaged. What reason did Cousin Alice give for refusing the invitation?"

"As far as I remember," said Sir Laurence, "she gave no reason at all."

"That was rather funny," Ethel remarked thoughtfully. "Have you ever asked them since, Uncle Laurie?"

"Yes, twice, dear," he answered, but with such obvious reluctance that Ethel could not fail to perceive he would rather not have answered the question at all.

"And Cousin Alice refused in the same way without giving any reason!" Ethel exclaimed. "Well," as Sir Laurence's silence gave assent to her conjecture, "I don't call it very polite of her."

To that expression of opinion Sir Laurence returned no answer, and they walked some little way in silence.

"Do you think, Uncle Laurie," Ethel asked unexpectedly, "that Cousin Alice dislikes me?"

"My dear Ethel," said Sir Laurence, "what has put such an idea as that into your head?"

"Well, I notice that you don't contradict it," said Ethel, slipping her arm through his. "I know I did behave disgracefully that day, but I don't think she need have remembered it all these years. After all, I was only a child then; I shouldn't be so silly now. I wonder," she went on musingly, "if Cousin Alice bears me a grudge because Aylewood belongs to me and not to Hugh."

Sir Laurence and his niece had left the ploughed field behind now, and were walking across the grass meadow that sloped upward to the farm. He gave an almost imperceptible start as Ethel uttered her last remark, but she was too intent upon her own thoughts to observe it.

"For, of course," continued Ethel, "it would have belonged to him if—"

"Eh!" exclaimed Sir Laurence, in a startled tone.

"—If he had been of the elder and not of the younger branch of the family. And, of course, if it had been entailed, it would have gone to him. Oh, you see, Uncle Laurence, I am not such a scatter-brained person as you imagine. I know all about entails and all those sort of things. And I daresay Cousin Alice often wished that Aylewood had been an entailed estate. Don't you think she has, Uncle Laurie?"

"I think it quite likely," Sir Laurence answered, a peculiar expression, unnoticed by Ethel, crossing his face.

"Then you think that it is because she minds Aylewood belonging to me that she has taken a dislike to me, and won't have anything to do with me?" summed up Ethel.

"My dear Ethel, I never said anything of the sort," Sir Laurence replied, almost irritably, or so at least it seemed to his astonished niece, who was entirely unaccustomed to such a note in his voice. "You really must not put your own surmises into other people's mouths."

Before Ethel could answer, an interruption in the shape of Mr. M'Gregor presented itself. He was coming across the field towards them at right angles, and Sir Laurence, with an air of being unusually glad to see him, waited for his manager to catch them up. So the subject of the Dunmaynes was perforce dropped, and Ethel, wondering a little what had made her uncle so unusually testy that morning, strolled away to have a chat with Mrs. M'Gregor. But Mrs. M'Gregor was not so easily found, and presently Ethel, leaving the farm by another gate,

wandered into the big nine-acre meadow, at the bottom of which the Jersey bull, Red Head, lived by himself in solitary grandeur. His premises occupied the lower strip of the field next to the cliff; strong palings separated him from the upper part of the field, and high hedges bounded his territory on either side and also at the bottom. He had a nice little shed to which he could retire both in wet weather and at night; and altogether, considering the arrangements that had been made for his comfort, he ought to have been a better tempered animal than he was. Somewhat to Ethel's disappointment he was in his shed now, and as the opening faced seawards, Ethel could not, from where she stood near the palings, catch as much as a glimpse of him. Continuing her walk, therefore, she skirted alongside the hedge, intending, when she got a little lower down, to scramble to the top of it and peer at the redoubtable Red Head through a gap she knew of.

This gap was almost in a line with his shed, the interior of which it commanded, and climbing to the summit of the high grassy bank, Ethel parted the bushes and looked through them. Then a sight for which she was not at all prepared, and which caused her to utter a loud exclamation, burst upon her view. Red Head, neither asleep nor quietly munching his hay, in one or other of which occupations she had expected him to be engaged, was standing at the entrance to his shed; his head, crowned with a vicious-looking pair of horns, was lowered, his tail was lashing furiously, and he was gaz-

ing fixedly in the opposite direction. And it was when she followed his glance, and saw on what his eyes were fastened, that Ethel gave utterance to that horrified exclamation. For Violet, led by what evil mischance Ethel could not imagine, had actually wandered into the very middle of the bull's field, and was now standing as if petrified, staring as fixedly at Red Head as he was staring at her. It was plain—or so at least Ethel thought—that she, Violet, had wandered into the field unthinkingly, and had only been recalled to the rashness of her act by a sight of the formidable beast standing in a threatening attitude at the door of the shed. They had probably become aware of each other's presence at one and the same moment.

Ethel hurriedly calculated her cousin's chances of escape. She was about three hundred yards from the gate by which she had entered. She had left it open, too—Violet never could remember that it was necessary to shut gates after her. On the other hand, there was barely a hundred yards between her and the bull. Therefore, if she turned and ran for the gate, the start would avail her but little; Red Head would catch her up long before she could reach it. If only, Ethel thought breathlessly, Violet could nerve herself to retreat slowly and imperceptibly backwards step by step, keeping her eyes fixed on the bull meanwhile, Red Head might content himself with glowering at her. But Ethel could discern, in spite of the distance that lay between them, that Violet was in a pitiable state of terror. Her face was deadly pale, she was trembling

from head to foot, and it needed only the sudden angry bellow to which Red Head gave vent to end the situation, and to send poor Violet flying back the way she had come, with the bull in full pursuit after her. At the same moment Ethel sprang down into the field, and ran shouting loudly after them both. Her idea was to attract Red Head's attention to herself. But in spite of her shouts and yells he did not as much as glance round; and in spite also of the fact that she was running after him faster than she had ever run with the ball in the most exciting hockey match she had ever played, she did not gain upon him, whereas he, on the other hand, was distinctly gaining upon Violet. She too was running as she had never run before. Fear, instead of depriving her of strength, had fortunately lent wings to her feet, and a backward glance that she cast now and again over her shoulder at her pursuing foe only increased her desire to put as much space as possible between them. For the space of some seconds they kept their course in that order for the gate, Violet leading, the bull a good second, and Ethel a bad third. Plainly, if she were to have any influence on the course of events, she must alter her tactics. Her eyes, glancing right and left as she ran, spied what she wanted—a big stone. Darting upon it, she paused long enough to take careful aim, and sent it whizzing through the air after Master Red Head; it hit him full on his shoulder, and with considerable force. Wheeling sharply round to see who had dared to attack him in the rear, his

bloodshot eyes—Ethel did not wonder they had struck terror into Violet; they made her quail too—fell upon Ethel; and forgetting Violet, he uttered another loud bellow which seemed to make the very ground shake, and goring the grass once with his horns, as if to show what he would do with her when he caught her, he rushed after her.

“Only,” Ethel thought, as she too turned and raced back the way she had come, “you won’t catch me, my friend.”

A hasty glance had shown her that Violet was now making good her escape, and feeling immensely pleased that her rear attack had proved so successful, Ethel headed straight for the gap, and with nearly ten yards in hand scrambled up the hedge, and laughed down into the face of her disappointed foe. Almost at the same moment Violet, not forgetting for once in her life to fasten a gate securely behind her, sank sobbing and crying on to the grass on the far side of the field.

Ethel’s shouts, though they had not apparently been loud enough to distract the attention of Red Head, had brought M’Gregor and two of the farm hands hurrying on to the scene; and though they had not been in time to interfere in it, they had witnessed all that had occurred, and the Scotch manager was full of admiration for the courage and cool resourcefulness that Ethel had displayed.

“If it hadn’t been for you, Miss Ethel, Miss Nugent would have been gored to a certainty!” Mr. M’Gregor exclaimed. “You saved her life to a dead certainty, there’s no mistake about that.”

And Violet, when she was able to say anything at all, said the same. Ethel found her perfectly hysterical with crying and sobbing, lying just where she had sunk down on the grass outside the gate; and she was so weak and shaken that, had it not been for the support of Ethel's arm, she would have been unable to walk home. As they neared the garden Wilfrid came running towards them. He had just come down from the farm, where every one was talking of the exciting incident.

"What on earth induced you to go into the field at all, Violet?" he exclaimed. "Surely you knew it was where the bull lived?"

"I—I had forgotten," she gasped, between her sobs. "I thought he was just an ordinary cow, and I wanted to—to show you that I wasn't really afraid of them."

"Poor old girl, was that it?" said Wilfrid sympathetically. "But you made an awful mistake when you began to practise being brave on that bull; he's a terror of an animal."

His sympathy caused Violet's tears to break out afresh, and she cried unrestrainedly. Ethel lost patience with her at last; it seemed so silly to cry now when the danger was past and done with.

"I could have understood it if she had broken down at the time," she said to Wilfrid, after they had reached home, and Violet, still weeping copiously, had been led off by her mother, who had hastily collected sal-volatile, eau-de-Cologne, salts, and a composing draught, to her own room; "but why on earth she should go on crying now beats me."

"You're as hard as nails, and that's a fact," said Wilfrid, gazing at her rather curiously. "But do you know, Ethel, it strikes me that you rather look down upon people who aren't as strong as you are in every way."

Ethel's gray eyes opened to their fullest width.

"Do I?" she said. "I can't bear people being silly, any way," she added, half impatiently, "and Violet is silly to go into hysterics and make a fuss now. But," with a shrug of her shoulders, "if she can't help it, she can't, and there's an end of it. I am going over to Bannister Park now. What do you say to coming?"

"I'm game, rather," said Wilfrid, seizing his cap.

It was somewhat hard, Violet thought, that she who had gone through the most danger—for, of course, Ethel was so well able to take care of herself that her peril had not been great—should not be universally regarded as the heroine of the morning's incident. Though she dwelt at great length on her own sensations when she first became aware into whose territory she had unwittingly walked, and described in the most graphic manner possible what she had felt when Red Head gained upon her, everybody was much more interested in the plucky manner in which Ethel had come to the rescue. On the other hand, the careless way in which Ethel made light of what she had done annoyed Violet; it lessened, she thought, a proper appreciation of the peril they had both been in. Yet whenever she recalled the horrible feeling that had overcome her when she became aware that the bull was gaining on her, a wave of gratitude to Ethel for having

saved her in the nick of time, if not from death, at any rate from being badly mauled and tossed, swept over her, and she hated herself for the petty, unworthy feeling of jealousy that she had allowed herself to feel for her cousin. If Ethel had only shown some signs of being jealous of her in return, Violet could have forgiven her much; but Ethel had so evidently not a spark of either envy or jealousy in her composition, that Violet felt an additional grudge against her on that account. Even when Violet proved, not only to herself but to every one who saw her, that there was, after all, one sport in which she beat Ethel hollow, she did not have the satisfaction of discovering that Ethel felt the least pang of envy.

The frost that had set in after the wet weather had come to stay, and it was on the ice that Violet astonished every one, except her brother, by the skill and grace of her movements.

She could really skate beautifully, and Ethel, who could merely do her edges, and who had been under the impression that Violet would not be able to do more than just go alone, if that, was loud in her admiration of her cousin's prowess. So were most of the other people present. Violet, thoroughly well pleased with the sensation she was creating, waltzed with Wilfrid, rather against his will—for, as he said, if Violet liked the way in which people lined up to watch them, and actually clapped them, he did not—and cut figures, and made grape vines, and whirled and skimmed about in the lightest and prettiest way imaginable.

"Well, Violet, you can skate jolly well," Ethel said, skating up to her cousin as she paused to rest for a few minutes. "I wish I could do one half the things that you can do."

"Try this," said Violet, doing an elaborate grape vine in front of Ethel; "it's as easy as anything."

"Nonsense. It needs no end of practice," said Wilfrid, coming up to them in time to overhear Violet's remark. "But I'll teach you to waltz in no time, Ethel."

As it bid fair, however, to take Ethel rather longer than that to learn how to waltz on the ice, she gave up the attempt, and organized a game of hockey instead.

Violet enjoyed herself exceedingly while the ice lasted—it was pleasant to feel that in skating, at all events, she outshone every one else; and although she would have liked to have known that Ethel envied her proficiency, she had to be content with her cousin's frank expressions of admiration. Certainly they were ungrudging enough to please any one; for the discovery that Violet, if no good at tennis or hockey, or any of the games at which Ethel herself excelled, could at any rate skate had considerably raised her in her cousin's estimation.

Chapter IX.

THE DIAMOND STAR.

THE eagerly expected day of the dance arrived at last, and dawned bright and clear. But even though they were going to dance all night, the splendid frost that still held could not be wasted, at any rate by Wilfrid and Ethel, and immediately after breakfast they set off on their bicycles with skates and sandwiches for Bannister Park. Violet refused to accompany them, declaring that if she took any exertion during the day she would be too tired to enjoy the dance properly, and she accordingly spent the morning loitering about the hall, watching the servants, who were busily at work there polishing the floor, decorating the walls, and generally making the fine hall ready for the great festivities of the evening.

In the afternoon she curled herself up on her bed and slept soundly until tea-time, when, roused by the gong, she got up and went yawningly downstairs. The sound of voices and the clatter of teacups led her in the direction of her uncle's study, and opening the door she found every one already assembled there for tea.

"You may well look surprised, my dear," Sir Laurence

said, noticing the look of astonishment that overspread her face. "I am suffering now for what Ethel is pleased to call my selfishness in not allowing my den to be used as a sitting-out place to-night. Consequently it happens to be at this moment the only room in the house that is habitable, and in which it is at all possible to have tea in peace and quietness."

"Oh, you were silly not to come skating to-day, Violet!" Ethel cried, who, seated in Sir Laurence's comfortable, padded revolving chair, was twirling herself gently to and fro as she drank her tea. "You have no idea what a perfectly splendid time we have had. And it's the last of it, I'm afraid, for it's not freezing to-night."

Ethel's face was glowing from her long day in the open air, and she looked particularly fresh and pretty at that moment. Violet, catching a glimpse of her own face, which was pale from want of fresh air and exercise, glanced enviously, and even a little sulkily, at the brilliant colour on Ethel's cheeks.

"Yes, it was a pity you didn't come, Violet," chimed in Wilfrid, unconsciously adding fuel to the fire. "There was a girl there who thought she could skate, and you would have enjoyed knocking the wind out of her sails, I know."

"Well, what is the good of telling me all that now?" said Violet pettishly.

"Besides," added Sir Laurence rather gravely, "though it is very nice to excel in any kind of sport, and one naturally takes a pleasure in doing anything that is worth doing well, it is an unworthy feeling to delight in it

merely for the sake of going one better over some one else."

"Yes, I know, Uncle Laurence, it was a spiteful speech of mine," Wilfrid said penitently, quick as ever to respond to the moods of those around him.

"It's a real pity that ice doesn't last longer in England," Ethel said, helping herself to another muffin. "I feel at present as if I should like it to last for another six months at least."

"But what would become of your hunting in that case?" asked Sir Laurence.

He spoke rather absently, but was recalled to a sense of what he had said by Ethel's expression.

"My hunting!" she exclaimed rather bitterly. Then perceiving that her tone had brought a cloud to his kind face, she smiled affectionately at him, and added lightly that the frost she proposed to institute should be accompanied by snow frozen so hard that all hunting could be done on skis.

Wilfrid caught at the idea, and he and Ethel carried on the conversation for a few moments in a lively strain, not forgetting at the same time to make such an excellent tea that at last Mrs. Nugent, who, ensconced in a deep armchair on the other side of the fireplace, had, according to her wont, been taking but a small share in the conversation, felt called upon to remonstrate with them on the ground that they would eat no dinner.

"We've got our lunch to make up for yet," said Ethel, laughing. "Sandwiches are not much to do a day's skating on."

"I only hope you won't be too tired to enjoy yourself to-night, dear," her aunt said anxiously. "You must simply be worn out, I'm afraid."

"Why, I'm not even tired," laughed Ethel, as she sent her cup up by Wilfrid to be refilled. "And I don't suppose we sat down once all day except just to eat those same sandwiches."

"I am thankful that Violet did not go," said Mrs. Nugent, who had read aright the regretful look that had crept into her daughter's face when Wilfrid had spoken of the girl who had skated so well, but whom his sister could so easily have surpassed. "She would have been far too tired to have enjoyed herself to-night if she had been on the ice all day. But then she is not as strong as you are, Ethel."

"No, I suppose she isn't," said Ethel carelessly, who was apt to assume that her splendid health and strength were somehow to be placed to her own credit, and that if other girls were not as strong as she was, they were in a measure to be blamed for that fact.

Yet though neither Wilfrid nor Ethel were tired, they thoroughly enjoyed lounging before the fire in Sir Laurence's comfortable study, discussing with much zest the delightful evening that lay before them. Nearly every one who had been asked to the dance had accepted the invitation, and both Ethel and Violet were especially pleased with the fact that if they all turned up, which they were sure to do, there would be about five more men than girls.

"There will be about sixty couples in all," said Ethel. "That will just fill the hall nicely without any crowding."

"Well, if they all require as much room as you and Wilfrid seemed to find necessary the other night when you were doing a galop, there will be hardly more than comfortable space for half a dozen couples," said Sir Laurence.

"Oh, that was a dreadful romp, Uncle Laurie," Ethel said, laughing; "and though it was great fun, we are not going to behave like that to-night."

Under the pretence that it was so long since he had been to a dance that he had quite forgotten how to dance, Wilfrid had persuaded his cousin to give him lessons in the art; and accordingly the Anstruthers and one or two other young people had been asked in, and they had had several impromptu and thoroughly enjoyable little dances among themselves, in preparation for the big dance that was to take place to-night.

"Is your dress all ready for you to put on, Violet, my dear?" observed Mrs. Nugent at that moment, turning to Violet, who was gazing meditatively into the fire, absorbed in the important question as to whether she should wear her hair high or low that evening.

"Yes, mother. Ruby was laying everything out on the bed as I came down, and looking tremendously important. —By the way, Ethel," turning anxiously to her cousin, "shall I have Ruby first to-night, or will you?"

"Oh, you may have her altogether," said Ethel carelessly. "Ruby only fidgets me; besides, Mrs. Mudge will give me any help that I want."

"You are more favoured than I am, then," Violet said. "Mrs. Mudge never offers to help me."

It was curious what odd, out-of-the-way little things excited Violet's jealousy. As a matter of fact, she would not on any account have exchanged Ruby's services that evening for those of Ruby's grandmother, so that it was entirely a dog in the manger sort of feeling that prompted the jealous remark.

It passed unnoticed, however, for Ethel was putting Buns through his tricks, and his growls at the name of Kruger were so loud and deep that Violet's voice was quite drowned; and by the time Buns had finished growling at Kruger, barking for Chamberlain, and had died for his King and country, and come alive again to eat the lump of sugar that was his reward for all his exertions, Violet's brief fit of jealousy had vanished.

After all, it was difficult to feel cross when she thought of the beautiful dress of white satin and tulle, the gift of her uncle, that was spread, with everything else that was necessary for her adornment that evening, on her bed upstairs.

"Oh, by the way, Uncle Laurie," Ethel said, giving her chair a sudden twirl round until she faced her uncle, who was standing at that moment on the hearthrug drinking his tea and watching Buns' antics with an amused smile, "I want to wear my diamond star to-night; can I?"

"Your diamond star!" echoed Violet before Sir Laurence could speak. "I didn't know you had any diamonds, Ethel."

"My diamond star is my one solitary piece of jewellery," Ethel answered. "It belonged to my mother. I may wear it, mayn't I, Uncle Laurence?"

"By all means, if you like," returned her uncle as he placed his cup on the mantelpiece, "and if you do not think you are too young to wear diamonds. What do you say, eh, Isabel? Diamonds on a chit of eighteen look rather out of place, I think. However, I will exhibit them, and let the question as to whether she can with propriety wear them or not be put to the vote."

He took a bunch of keys out of his pocket as he spoke, and crossed the room to his desk. Ethel jumped up eagerly to make way for him, and he took her place.

Sir Laurence's desk was a big, old-fashioned bureau of solid mahogany. When the flap was let down a bewildering number of drawers and pigeon-holes were disclosed to view. In the middle of them a small cupboard with a Gothic-shaped door was set, and fitting a key into the lock Sir Laurence drew it open, and showed a set of ten drawers, ranged one on the top of another, behind it.

"Just the sort of desk," said Violet, who had not before seen it open, "in which one would expect to find lost wills and rolls of money, and all sorts of nice exciting things. Did you ever find a lost will in it, Uncle Laurence?"

"Never, my dear," he answered as he pulled open one of the drawers and took out a flat leather case. He handed it with a smile to Ethel, who, taking it eagerly, pressed a spring, and revealed to sight an exceedingly pretty diamond star that lay twinkling on its bed of soft blue velvet.

"Oh, how lovely!" Violet exclaimed, her envy at Ethel's possession of such a trinket swallowed up for the moment

in genuine admiration. "I should just think I would wear this if I were you, Ethel."

"Vote number one," cried Ethel exultantly. "What do you say, Aunt Isabel?"

"It is very pretty, dear," Mrs. Nugent said as Ethel, going to the fireplace, held the star in the light of the flames so that the diamonds should sparkle brightly, "and not at all too big for a girl to wear."

"Vote number two," cried Ethel triumphantly; "so it does not matter at all what you and Wilfrid think, Uncle Laurie. I have the casting vote in any case."

Sir Laurence laughed. "You can take care of them yourself then in future, Ethel," he said. "I daresay you have a lock-up place of your own upstairs."

"I see it can be worn as a star, or as a pendant, or as a brooch," said Violet, who could scarcely keep her eyes off the glittering stones. "How will you wear it, Ethel?"

"As each in turn," Wilfrid interrupted.

"A very good idea," said Ethel as she snapped the case and slipped it into her pocket; "so if I disappear from view occasionally, you will know that I am rearranging my diamonds, hoping to delude people into the idea that I have a pendant and a brooch as well as a star."

"What a jolly desk this is of yours, Uncle Laurence," said Wilfrid; "it looks as if it would hold any amount of things."

"What do you keep in all those little drawers?" added Violet, pointing to the set that stood just inside the cup-

board door, and from one of which Sir Laurence had taken Ethel's star.

"They contain various things," answered her uncle; "among others, the sum of money that I get down every month from my bankers to pay my household bills. That is why you see I have a lock on the cupboard. For if I leave the desk open, as I generally do, I know that my money and my more private papers are under lock and key."

"Do you know, Uncle Laurie," said Ethel, who had taken up his bunch and was examining the one belonging to the cupboard, "that this is uncommonly like the key of my golf locker. I shouldn't like to make a rash statement, but it would not surprise me at all to find that they are exactly the same."

"It would surprise me very much indeed," returned Sir Laurence. "This lock was specially made for me, and I feel confident that no key but its own would fit it."

"If I felt at all certain that I could find it, I would go and hunt for my golf key and shake your confidence, then," said Ethel mischievously; "but I don't want a long search for nothing, and at present I haven't the very remotest idea where my keys are. Besides, if I did find them and they didn't fit, you would be so horribly triumphant that altogether I don't think I will risk it—not just now, at any rate."

The dance was a great success, and perhaps no one enjoyed it more thoroughly than Sir Laurence and his sister, who found their pleasure in watching the delight

of the young people present. Mrs. Nugent's eyes fairly shone with pride when she saw Violet, who looked exceedingly pretty in her new dress, surrounded by eager would-be partners, and it did not need Violet's triumphant whisper that she could have filled her card three times over to assure her that such indeed was the case. Wilfrid, too, enjoyed himself greatly, and with his usual good nature was always ready to dance with any girl who looked as if she were not getting her fair share of partners.

Several other dances were given in the neighbourhood during the early part of January, and Ethel and her cousins went to them all, and enjoyed them very much. But, as Wilfrid himself remarked with a big sigh, every good time has an end, and his holidays soon drew to a conclusion, and he returned to town and to work.

The house seemed very quiet after his departure, more especially as a day or two later Sir Laurence also went up to London on business.

"I find I shall not be able to get back until the twenty-second," he said to Ethel as she drove with him to the station. "Yes, I know," he added, as she was about to speak, "that that is the day you have fixed upon to go and join your friend in Barnstown, so I will just miss you. However, that cannot be helped. I shall come over a day or so afterwards and have a look at you, and judge for myself how Miss Ida is likely to get on as an actress."

Nice rooms kept by a respectable woman who was

known to Sir Laurence had been engaged by him for his niece and her friend, and as Ethel had heard from Ida that she would be there early in the afternoon of Tuesday the twenty-second, she intended to time her own arrival to coincide with Ida's.

"Yes, I am longing to see her act too," said Ethel. "So far she likes the work and the life very much indeed, although both are a good deal harder than she expected. I may drive back, uncle, mayn't I?" she added as they made the descent of the steep hill leading to the station.

"So that was why you came to see me off, was it?" Sir Laurence asked with an amused smile. "Very well, you may; but you must have Bates beside you. The Spider is pulling a good bit this morning, and you must be very careful not to let him get out of hand. He seems to have communicated some of his excitement to Rob Roy also."

Ethel indignantly disclaimed the idea that it was with any ulterior designs upon the reins that she had accompanied her uncle to the station, but she was greatly pleased, nevertheless, at the permission to drive back that she had won from him. It was but seldom of late that she had had the chance of driving even one of the horses, and this was the first time that Sir Laurence had ever consented to her driving Rob Roy and the Spider together. In the afternoon they were generally wanted for the landau, and if Sir Laurence used them at all for the mail phaeton he invariably drove them himself.

"Oh, I'll be very careful," Ethel said jubilantly. "I don't know why you always look upon my driving with such

contempt, Uncle Laurie. My own opinion is that I could drive almost any horse that ever stood between the shafts."

"I really believe it is," Sir Laurence said a little dryly. "Now my opinion is, you know, that you rate your powers in that direction somewhat higher than they deserve to be rated."

Ethel laughed. Sir Laurence's good-humoured mimicry of her tone prevented her from feeling vexed at his words.

They arrived at the station only a few minutes before the train was due; and by the time the luggage was labelled and Sir Laurence's ticket taken, the train came in.

"I shall be back on the twenty-second," he said as Ethel stood at the door of the first-class carriage in which, with the *Times* and one or two weekly journals, he was comfortably installed. "Don't get into any mischief while I am away."

Ethel laughed and promised not to, and the next moment the train moved slowly out of the station.

She reached home without any misadventure by the way, handling the two horses with a dexterity that even won her a few words of praise from the taciturn Bates.

"You'll learn how to drive some day after all, Miss Ethel," he said; "but you need a lot of practice to make you what one might call a first-rate whip."

"And it's just that practice that I can't get," Ethel said, her grievances on that score recalled to her mind by the old groom's remark. "I am more badly off for horses to drive now than I was last holidays. These two seem to be always wanted for the landau."

"It's your recklessness that stands in the way at present

of your being what one might call a good driver," Bates said, following his own train of thought regardless of his young mistress's interruption. "You never seem to make allowances for the steepness of these hills when you go down them; and as for your turning of corners—well, you know, Miss Ethel, round you go with the horses without ever a thought of the carriage behind them."

Ethel laughed and urged the horses on. Bates might be—indeed he was—well qualified to speak with authority on the subject of driving, but he had always, she considered, taken too slighting a view of her skill in that direction; for surely driving, provided one kept one's head and nothing went wrong with the reins, was one of the easiest things in the world. At least so it seemed to Ethel; and when, having alighted at the front door, she stood a moment and watched Bates drive round to the stables, she determined one day to have a coach and four of her own, and to make a name for herself as the owner of a crack team.

The next few days were wet, and Ethel missed her uncle more than she had thought possible. The house seemed dreary and empty without him. Violet, to whom her holidays had given a fresh zest for work, went daily to Mr. Tristram's studio, driving when the rain was very heavy into Torleigh in a closed carriage. Mrs. Nugent seemed to rise later and to go to bed earlier, and since Wilfrid's departure her spirits had been markedly more depressed. Beyond a mere hurried scrawl, telling of his arrival, and announcing that he had gone back to

his usual grind, he had not written; and his mother, who had confidently expected that in the first letter after his return to London he would be able to tell her that he had been promoted from a clerk to an articled pupil, was grievously disappointed at not hearing that any such promotion had come his way, and only her promise to Wilfrid not to interfere in the matter prevented her from writing a letter of indignant remonstrance to her brother-in-law.

"Perhaps he does not want to write again, mother, until he has good news to tell us," Violet said by way of consolation. "Perhaps Uncle Thomas has already spoken to him about it, and Wilfrid does not want to say anything to you until everything is settled. You know, mother, that he loves to spring things upon us as a surprise. Depend upon it, we shall soon get a letter from him with some good news in it."

"I only hope we may, dear," Mrs. Nugent said with a sigh. But Violet's words so far made an impression on her that from that day she began to look out more anxiously than ever for the post, and invariably drove into Torleigh every afternoon in order to get the midday letters as early as possible.

In fact, everything seemed to combine, Ethel thought, to render that particular week in January a cheerless one. Sir Laurence was away; the weather was atrocious; Mrs. Nugent sighed far more often than she spoke; Violet, tired after her day's work, was invariably cross, and complained of dullness in the evening; Whitefoot was lame; influenza was rife in the neighbourhood; the hockey ground was so deep

in mud, and so many of the players were down with influenza, that all practices and matches were postponed until further notice; she could rarely get any one to play golf with her; boating or sailing, equally with fishing, was out of the question; and most of the lanes were impassable, on a bicycle at any rate.

Yet all these things put together, and contrasted with the enjoyable Christmas just passed, with its dancing and skating and merry indoor times with the Anstruthers and Wilfrid, hardly brought a grumble to Ethel's lips. If she could not do one thing, there was sure to be something else she could do; and if all games, together with riding and driving and bicycling, were out of the question for the time being, she could at any rate go for long walks, and in a short skirt, high golfing boots, a mackintosh coat, and a flat cloth cap she could defy both rain and wind.

On the morning of Monday the twenty-first of January she came down to breakfast in that costume, minus, of course, the cap and mackintosh, and found herself, as was not infrequently the case, the first in the room. Though Violet had conquered her habit of unpunctuality to a very great extent, she had not yet, as she said herself, rushed violently to the other extreme and fallen into the way of being too punctual, and as, when Ethel made her appearance this morning, it wanted still a few minutes to nine, Violet was not yet down.

A letter from Ida lay beside Ethel's place, and picking it up she strolled over to the fireplace to read it. It was written from Exeter, in which town the company had had

an engagement during the last week, and told Ethel that Ida would arrive in Barnstow at a rather later hour than the one she had originally fixed upon; for one of the canons of the cathedral, an old friend of her father's, who had been very kind to her during the week she had been in Exeter, had insisted on her lunching with himself and his wife on the Tuesday, and taking a later train to Barnstow, which was not more than an hour's journey from Exeter.

"But I shall be at 13 Gillies Street"—the address of the rooms chosen by Sir Laurence for the two girls—"by tea-time, so mind you are there by that time too. Let me know what train you are coming by."

"Ah!" exclaimed Violet, who, humming a gay little tune, entered the room at that moment, "a letter from Wilfrid, and for me. I wonder he didn't write to mother; but perhaps she has got a letter too."

Violet pounced upon her letter, and moved, as Ethel had done, to the fireplace to read it. It was a cold, raw morning, and the warmth of the fire was very pleasant. The breakfast coming in at that moment, Ethel went to the table to pour out the coffee. She poured out her own cup and Violet's, and then seeing that her cousin was deeply absorbed in her letter, Ethel proceeded to walk round the table and to collect the materials for her breakfast. And as she tackled it with a good appetite, she reflected that she must write to Ida, and tell her that she would not be able to join her until the evening.

She had had an intimation from the secretary of the

hockey club the previous evening, informing her that a match against the Frimly eleven had been fixed for the Tuesday afternoon, and though one or two of the first eleven would be unable to play, it was earnestly hoped that each one whom influenza had left capable of standing upright and grasping a hockey stick would be on the club grounds punctually at three o'clock.

"So that quite puts it out of the question that I can be with Ida by tea-time," reflected Ethel. "I wonder how the trains go?"

She rang and sent for a local time-table. A change at Newton seemed to be inevitable; but she found that if she went by the 6.19 from Torleigh, it would bring her to the Junction in time to catch the 6.39 from Newton, which would take her to Barnstown shortly after seven.

"That one will do," she said to herself; "if there was an earlier one from Torleigh I couldn't catch it, for I must come back here and change. I'll write—no, I'll wire to Ida, telling her that I will go straight from the station to the theatre, and send my box to our rooms by another cab."

Her own arrangements thus satisfactorily completed and her breakfast in a fair way of being finished, Ethel's attention turned toward Violet, who was still standing with her back towards her cousin, apparently engaged in reading her letter.

"Everything will be stone cold if you don't hurry," observed Ethel. "What news does Wilfrid give of him-

self?" she added, glancing up from her occupation of spreading marmalade on a hot buttered scone.

Violet raised her head with a sudden start. She did not turn her head, but the glimpse Ethel caught of the reflection of her cousin's face in the glass over the mantel-piece caused her to lay down the delectable morsel she had been about to put into her mouth on her plate again, and to exclaim,—

"Why, what on earth is the matter with you, Violet? You look as though you had seen a ghost."

Violet's face was certainly very pale, and it wore a strange, stunned expression that would have been enough without her pallor to attract attention to her. But meeting her cousin's surprised look of scrutiny, she returned hastily,—

"Nothing is the matter. What should be the matter?"

"I am sure I don't know," said Ethel, shrugging her shoulder; "only you looked for a moment as though you were going to faint. Perhaps it was my fancy."

"Yes, it must have been your fancy," Violet echoed hastily.

"Unless," pursued Ethel, "you have had bad news from Wilfrid."

Violet's moods were certainly hard to account for that morning. The suggestion that she had had bad news from Wilfrid seemed to throw her into a state of angry agitation.

"There isn't any bad news from Wilfrid," she said irritably. "Why should there be bad news? Can't

Wilfrid write to me without your immediately thinking all sorts of things about him? Can't—" She broke off suddenly, arrested by the look of sheer amazement on Ethel's face. "I have got such a bad headache," she said in a different tone, "that I really don't know what I am talking about."

"Oh, you've got a headache," said Ethel, instantly accepting this explanation and forgetting the good spirits, as evinced by the little tune she had been humming, in which Violet had come downstairs only a few minutes previously. "I thought something was the matter. Come and have some breakfast; that will do you good. Well, what does Wilfrid say for himself, and what reason does he give for not having written for so long?"

"He doesn't give any reason at all; he doesn't even mention it."

As Violet gave that answer—which she did in a mechanical manner, as if her thoughts were elsewhere—she slipped her letter, with a movement that was almost surreptitious, into her pocket.

"Rather casual of him that, isn't it?" remarked Ethel. "Well, Aunt Isabel will be glad to hear that he has written at last. I believe she has been imagining all sorts of things about him. Is his uncle going to make him a lawyer?"

"I don't know. Yes—no; he doesn't say," returned Violet in a hasty, harassed tone. "I—I have hardly read the letter yet," she explained as Ethel gave her rather an astonished glance, "and—and Wilfrid's hand is such a

difficult one to read that it sometimes takes me ages to make out what he says," she concluded, speaking in a more natural tone.

"O bother!" Ethel exclaimed. The exclamation had no reference, however, to Wilfrid's handwriting—it was called forth by a sudden spatter of rain that suddenly fell on the window pane; and jumping up from her chair, Ethel went to the window and looked out.

"It's only a shower," she announced after a moment's anxious scrutiny of the sky. "I was afraid we were going to have another wet day. And really we have had enough wet weather to last us till next Christmas. Well, good-bye, Violet; you won't mind my going off, will you, but I've done my breakfast."

If Ethel had happened to glance at her cousin as she left the breakfast-room she would not have entertained any doubt as to whether Violet minded her unceremonious departure or not; the look of real heartfelt relief that overspread her face as the door closed behind Ethel would have been a sufficient answer.

No sooner, however, was she assured that she was really alone than Violet's expression changed again, and gave place to one of anxiety and consternation. Pushing away her plate with its untasted food, she drew her letter from her pocket and began to read it again. As she read, the look of alarm and dread that was imprinted on her face increased, until, apparently unable any longer to sit still, she sprang to her feet, and crushing the letter in her hand began to pace the room.

"Oh, what shall I do? what can I do?" she moaned half under her breath. "O Wilfrid!"

Tears sprang to her eyes, and suddenly flinging herself down on the sofa with a movement that had none of the affected grace she was generally careful to assume, she buried her face in the cushions and burst out crying. She cried until a step in the passage caused her to start up and hastily dry her eyes.

It was Roberts coming to clear the table; and composing her features with an effort, Violet hurried past him and went upstairs, intending to seek the shelter of her bedroom. But warned by the voices of the maids that they were at work there, she turned off in the direction of her studio; and once there, with the door shut and locked behind her, she gave way again to the bitter tears that had been interrupted downstairs. She cried until her eyes were red and swollen, and though her sobs were so low as to have been inaudible to any one outside the door, they yet shook her from head to foot.

Presently the chill of the room caused a shiver to run through her, and she awoke to the fact that she was getting very cold indeed. The fire, though laid, was not lighted, for Monday was one of the days on which she went to Mr. Tristram. A half-formed resolve to light the fire and stay at home that morning passed through her mind, but to change her plans at the last moment would be to excite comment and question.

And Violet was anxious not to draw attention to herself that morning. As yet it was only twenty minutes past

nine; there remained nearly half an hour, then, in which to get rid of the traces of her tears, and Violet determined to make the best use possible of that time. Going to the window she threw up the sash, and let the cold, damp air blow freely in on her heated, tear-stained cheeks.

Yet though she was resolute not to cry again, the look of heartsick misery on her face deepened as she stood looking out over the wet, glistening leaves of the shrubbery below her, to the hedgerows and fields that rose in a gentle slope to the horizon.

From time to time she wrung her hands in a sort of impotent despair; and at last, as if unable to bear any longer the thoughts to which the letter had given rise, she took it from her pocket and began to read it again. And there could be no doubt that the letter was one that, coming from a brother, might well have made a sister, less given to tears than Violet, cry unrestrainedly.

“MY DEAR VIOLET” (it began), “I don’t know what you will say when you have read this letter; but call me every hard name you can think of, and you won’t have gone beyond the mark. For I’m a thief. Jolly thing that for a fellow to tell his sister, but it’s true. But mind you, Violet, you’re not to tell a word of this to a soul; above all, not to mother. She will have to know by the end of the week, for Uncle Tom will be back on Wednesday, and if I haven’t got the money by then—and, of course, I can’t get it—he will turn me out of the office straightway, or

clap me in jail ; so the best thing I can do is to bolt while I can, so don't be surprised if before you get this I'm at the other end of the world."

Seeing that the letter was only dated the day before, his journey would have had to be accomplished in remarkably quick time ; but Violet was in no mood to notice trifling discrepancies of that sort. The matter of the letter was far too serious to admit of her criticising its style.

"The plain truth of all this is, that one day last week Uncle Tom was called up to Scotland in a hurry, and he sent for me into his private room and handed me a cheque for one hundred pounds, and some bills that I was to pay out of it.

" 'Cash the cheque on your way here to-morrow morning,' he said, 'and you can take leave of absence from the office until lunch time and go round and pay them. There will be one pound three and six over, which you can leave on my desk for me.'

"Well, I expect you can guess what is coming. It all began by my disobeying Uncle Tom's instructions to start with, for instead of waiting to cash the cheque the next morning, I cashed it as I went home that afternoon ; for I thought that it would save me an extra walk in the morning, and give me more time to have a stroll on my own account. I would give about all I had in the world now if I had only done what he told me. On my way back to my diggings that evening I met a fellow I know, and he asked me to dine with him at his club and have

some fun afterwards. So after dinner we went round to his room, where he has set up a regular little roulette table. Some other chaps came in too. Well, the upshot of the whole wretched business is that I first lost three sovereigns of my own, and then fifty-four pounds out of Uncle Tom's hundred. I don't believe I have slept a wink since. That was last Thursday, and to-day is only Sunday. It seems years since then. I feel as if I were going off my head. And next Wednesday I've got to face Uncle Tom and tell him what I have done, and when I think of that I feel pretty desperate. I've told you all this, Violet, because I had to tell some one; but mind you're not to tell a soul. I think if mother knew it, it would cut her up most awfully. And perhaps Uncle Tom may let me pay him back by degrees; but, anyhow, there's an end now to all chance of his keeping me on even as a clerk. What I want you to do for me, Violet, is, if the worst comes to the worst, just to try and persuade mother that after all I shall get on far better in the colonies than here; and if she can be brought to believe that, she won't mind my going in the least. Uncle Tom has been awfully good to me. I know you and mother don't think so, but he has; but I can't expect him to overlook this—no one would—so I must just take the consequences. I don't know what I have written to you. I haven't the heart to read it over, but I know I can trust you to keep my secret, and help mother to cheer up about me later on.—Your affectionate brother,

“WILFRID.”

Wilfrid's hand, never an easy one to read, was, under the stress of agitation in which he had written, almost illegible in places, and Violet's brows became knitted more than once in her earnest endeavour to decipher every word. It seemed fully as bad on this, her third, perusal of it as it had seemed at first. The appalling fact that Wilfrid had made away with all that money was not one that in any way grew less terrible with familiarity.

Violet's tears very nearly flowed again as she thought of the trouble into which her brother had got himself; but a glance at the clock, the hands of which pointed to twenty past ten, caused her to make a determined effort to check them. If she cried again she could not go to the studio; and if she stayed at home her mother would be sure to ask the reason, and Violet felt that if she were to be subjected to much questioning she would break down and betray Wilfrid's secret.

Violet could not understand why he should so strictly have enjoined her to secrecy. If Mrs. Nugent had only known of her son's difficulty she would have sent him a cheque sufficient to replace the money he had lost by return of post, and he could then have paid the bills and got the receipts ready to give Mr. Nugent when he returned; or if only Sir Laurence had been at home, Violet thought, she could have asked him for the money. Fifty-four pounds was not, after all, such a tremendously big sum of money; she felt sure that he would have lent it gladly to have saved his nephew from disgrace.

Violet's reflections were, however, brought up sharp by

the recollection of the injunction of secrecy that had been laid upon her. Even though Sir Laurence had been at home she could not have applied to him for help. What was she to do, then?

It was with her mind in a perfect fever of anxiety about her brother that Violet went to her room to put on her things. Yet even in the midst of her distress she was careful to tread quietly, lest her mother, who had not yet left the adjoining bedroom, should hear her, and call her to come in before she went.

It was no wonder that, with her thoughts so pre-occupied with Wilfrid, Violet did but poor work that morning. Though she was familiar with almost every sentence in the fatal letter that was causing her such keen distress, she yet wanted to read it again and again, in the vain hope of finding some glimmer of comfort in it that she had overlooked before. So under the plea of a headache, which was no imaginary plea, she left the studio early and set out on her long walk home. But the oftener she read the letter the more struck she was by its tone of utter despair. Apparently Wilfrid did not even think it possible that anything could be done to help him. He certainly did not deem it within the range of possibility that he would be able to restore the money, but spoke as though discovery and confession were inevitable. Oh, Violet thought in desperation, if only she had some money; Wilfrid need not then give way to despair. But she had scarcely fifty shillings of her own at the moment; neither had she any article of value, nothing that would realize any-

thing like the sum she wanted. Ethel's diamond star came into her mind. If that were only hers, what an easy way there would be out of the difficulty.

The road from Torleigh to Nutcombe was practically deserted at that hour in the day—at no time did Violet find it a particularly interesting road—so that there was nothing to prevent her thoughts dwelling on Wilfrid. She began to wish that Sir Laurence had been at home. Even though she might not tell him for what purpose she wanted the money, she might have asked him to lend her the fifty-four pounds. She felt convinced that he would not have refused her request, especially if she had told him how vitally important it was that she should have the money. But he was not at home, so that the only avenue of escape she could see for Wilfrid was closed to him. It was maddening to think that she, the only person in the world whom Wilfrid had told of the terrible straits he was in, should be utterly powerless to help him.

When she reached her uncle's house, which she did feeling thoroughly exhausted, Violet found that she was to lunch alone. Mrs. Nugent, Roberts informed her, had not yet quitted her room, and Miss Ethel, who had come in half an hour ago, had gone out again immediately, leaving word as she went that she would not be in to lunch. Though Violet had eaten hardly any breakfast, she could scarcely touch anything now, and made only the poorest pretence of a lunch. As she went slowly upstairs to take off her things, Mrs. Mudge came out of her mother's room, noiselessly closing the door behind her.

"Your mother has just fallen asleep, Miss Violet," the old housekeeper said in a cautious whisper. "She has hardly slept at all for two nights past, and is now fairly worn out, so if you are going to your room, Miss Violet, tread quietly. It's almost a pity that there is that communicating door between your two rooms."

Violet nodded. "I'll take off my things in my studio," she said, "and not go to my room at all."

But it was with an added sense of bearing the weight of Wilfrid's trouble alone that Violet shut herself into the studio. It would have been a great relief to have talked to her mother for a little while, even though the subject of Wilfrid's letter—even the fact that she had received a letter from him—was rigidly excluded from the conversation.

It had turned out a wet afternoon after all, and the patter of the steadily falling rain formed a dreary but fitting accompaniment to Violet's thoughts. Fond though she was of warmth and comfort, it did not even occur to her to light the fire, but throwing herself down on the sofa, she propped her head on her elbow and allowed her depressed thoughts full sway.

Somewhere in London, probably at the office from which he was so soon to be turned away in disgrace, Wilfrid must now be sitting as unhappy and as full of forebodings about his future as she was, and the thought of her helplessness to assist him nearly drove her distracted. Why, oh why, she thought miserably, for the fiftieth time at least since reading his letter, had he made such a point of her telling no one? Why

have told her at all, if she was to be bound down to such secrecy? For if he had told nobody besides herself, and she was to tell no one else, how was he to get help to extricate himself from his present terrible position? Under those circumstances she was about the most useless person in the world to have been put in possession of his secret, for she might as well hope to raise ten thousand pounds as fifty. The few trinkets she possessed would fetch, at the outside, ten pounds. It would have been such a simple matter for Wilfrid to have written to their mother. She would have cried, and there would have been a dreadful scene, but she would have written a cheque at once, and Wilfrid would have received it in time to replace the money before Uncle Thomas came back to London.

As she sat there in the cold and fast darkening room, Violet wondered whether after all she would not be justified in taking her mother into her confidence. Yet even while the thought passed through her mind, Violet knew that the very last thing she would do would be to disobey Wilfrid in that respect. He had always told her things. "Mother must not be worried" had always been a formula with him, especially during the happy Christmas holidays that were just past. It struck Violet, as a side issue only to the subject that was uppermost in her thoughts, that perhaps her mother was not as strong or as well as she used to be. Devonshire did not perhaps suit her. Well, if Wilfrid went out disgraced and ruined to the colonies, Uncle Laurence might not like them to

stay with him any longer, and they would have to seek an obscure home elsewhere; perhaps they would even follow Wilfrid out to the colonies, and live and die in some up-country station far away in the bush.

The contemplation of that possibility very nearly brought the tears to Violet's eyes again, and on her own behalf this time. But she had enough real trouble to occupy her mind without dwelling upon imaginary woes, and the thought of dying in some lonely bush hut, though not a pleasing one, was after all too remote to merit more than a passing shiver, and with a dreary sigh she abandoned herself again to a melancholy review of Wilfrid's position. If Sir Laurence had only been at home she might have done something to avert the disaster that was surely preparing for her brother. Without betraying his confidence—without, for the matter of that even mentioning his name, or telling her uncle who the money was for—she might have borrowed the money from him, and sent it to Wilfrid by that evening's post.

Rightly or wrongly, she felt sure that if she had appealed to Sir Laurence, and told him in what urgent need she was of the money, he would have given it to her almost without question, and—she glanced at the clock that stood on her mantelpiece—in an hour's time a cheque that would have saved Wilfrid's honour would be in the post and on its way to him.

What a terrible misfortune it was, then, that Sir Laurence was not at home. Five minutes'—less than that, two minutes'—conversation with him would have sufficed;

then he would have sat down at his desk, unlocked the little cupboard door, behind which the little row of drawers was hidden, taken out his cheque book, or counted out a roll of notes, and all the misery and unhappiness which she had suffered since the morning would be swept away and be as if they had never existed. Sir Laurence's absence from home at that juncture was nothing short of a calamity.

She could picture Wilfrid waiting and watching in his lonely lodgings, heartsick with anxiety as to what the next few days would bring forth, hoping against hope that he would be able by hook or by crook to obtain the missing fifty-four pounds before Mr. Nugent came back, and so prevent it ever being discovered that he had gambled away part of the original sum with which he had been entrusted. She felt that she could not bring herself to write and tell him that she had been able to do nothing for him. His disappointment would be too bitter.

Why, oh why, had Sir Laurence chosen that particular week to be away from home? It would have to be held answerable for the total destruction of Wilfrid's whole future career. His prospects in life were ruined for ever, and simply because Sir Laurence was not at hand to write a mere cheque, or to give her a few bank notes. Afterwards, when he heard of the situation in which she, Violet, had found herself, he would be the first to regret his inopportune absence. He might even ask her why she had not gone to his desk and taken the money herself.

And when he came to reflect on the vital issues that had hung on her having the money, Violet made sure that that would be the very first question he would ask her. Why, feeling sure that he would have given her the money had he been at home, had she not had the sense to take it, he being unfortunately absent?

Once Violet had convinced herself that it would certainly be her uncle's wish that she should go to his desk and take out enough for Wilfrid's needs, she lost no time in making up her mind that she would act in accordance with his desires. She did not disguise from herself the fact that it was not a particularly agreeable task that she had set herself. To begin with, she would have to steal like a thief into the study, and abstract the money by stealth. If any one—Roberts, for instance, or Mrs. Mudge—were to come upon her, they would be certain to misconstrue her action, and that would not be pleasant. Only to Sir Laurence himself would she be answerable for what she was about to do, and only he, therefore, must know of the visit she was about to pay to his desk.

Rising from the sofa on which she had lain for the last half-hour, she opened the door of the studio and looked out into the passage. It was quiet and apparently deserted, as was also the hall beneath. She glanced at the clock again. It was a quarter to six. All the servants, then, would be at tea. She would never have a more fitting opportunity than the present one. She set out, treading on tiptoe first; then becoming aware that, however suspicious the thing she was presently about to do might

appear, she had at any rate a perfect right to walk down the passage, she fell into her usual tread, and so came to the head of the stairs. There she paused, for the fact that the little door that shut in the row of drawers in her uncle's desk would certainly be locked occurred to her for the first time, and she had not got the key. Hard on the heels of that thought came another. How about the key that Ethel had laughingly asserted would fit the lock—the key of her golf locker?

Ethel had a trick of depositing such trifles as her keys, her gloves, and her purse in various places over the house for their better safe-keeping, and then utterly forgetting their whereabouts. Two or three days ago she had spent the best part of an hour hunting for those same keys, and had been obliged finally to go off to the links without them, meaning to have her locker forced open. She had been saved from that necessity, however, when she got there, by the discovery that her keys were hanging in the lock; and with the memory of that fruitless hour's search still fresh in her mind, she had dropped them on her return home again into a big copper vase that stood on one of the hall tables, declaring that at any rate she would know where to find them next time. •

Violet, who had been made aware, as indeed had the whole household, of the loss of the keys, had chanced to be in the hall when her cousin came back, and from her snug corner by the fireside had idly watched them being dropped into the copper vase, little thinking who would next make use of them, and for what purpose.

The house was very quiet—so quiet that it seemed to Violet as she crossed the hall that the sound of her feet on the polished boards must echo loudly all over it, and cause every one who heard her to wonder who was in the hall. The keys were still in the copper vase, and Violet drew them out and examined them. There were two; one was a big door key, the other a narrow, slender key of somewhat uncommon make. The latter was evidently the one which Ethel had had in her mind when she said she had a key that would fit her uncle's desk; and with them both in her hand, Violet went across to the door of her uncle's study. Even then she was doing nothing questionable. No one would have gainsaid her perfect right to go into the room. Ethel rummaged the bookshelves at will, used her uncle's notepaper and envelopes, and generally made herself free of the room; but Violet, who was secretly a little afraid of her uncle, rarely ventured into the study, and had scarcely been in it since the day of the dance, when they had all had afternoon tea there. Nevertheless, no one would have thought her being there at that moment strange. Had one of the servants looked in, it would merely have been supposed that she was there to fetch something—in search most probably of a book.

Closing the door noiselessly behind her, she switched on the light, and then, anxious to get the task she had set herself over as quickly as possible, she walked straight up to the desk, lowered the outside flap, drew out the supports that kept it in position, and fitted the smaller of Ethel's

two keys into the lock of the little cupboard. As Ethel had declared it would, it fitted as though it had been made for it; and unlocking it, Violet opened the door and pulled out one of the little drawers.

Bundles of papers with rubber bands round them met her view. In quick succession she opened the next drawer, and the next, but found neither notes nor gold. Now, indeed, she felt that her position, should one of the servants come into the room, would be humiliating indeed, and liable to the gravest misconstruction, and the thought so quickened her movements that it was with lightning-like rapidity she opened and shut drawers in quick succession. But it was not until she came to the last drawer of all that she found what she had begun to fear might not be there at all—a roll of bank-notes! Clutching it with eager, trembling fingers, she drew it out. The notes were for five pounds each, and Violet counted ten and then paused. Wilfrid's debt amounted to fifty-four pounds. How was she to manage to send him the odd four pounds? With a stifled exclamation at her own slowness of comprehension, she separated yet another five-pound note from the roll. He could, of course, send her back the change. Stuffing the eleven crisp bits of paper into her pocket, she put the rest back into the drawer, closed it, shut and locked the cupboard, put up the flap, pushed in the supports, then with a quick, backward glance to make sure that she had left everything as she had found it, she switched out the light and left the room, unaware that in her haste she had actually left the keys hanging in the lock.

She gained the studio without meeting any one, and locking herself in, sat down to write to Wilfrid. She had not much time before the post left, and as she particularly wanted him to get her letter before he went to the office next morning, she dashed off a few lines in a hurry. Two things only were in her mind as she wrote. One was a feeling of jubilation that she had been able to save her brother from a great peril; the second, that she had been faithful to the trust he had reposed in her, and had kept her secret from every one.

“DEAREST WILFRID,—I am sending you the money to pay Uncle Thomas; but don’t be afraid—no one knows a word of what you told me. Don’t say anything about the money when you acknowledge this; just say you have got my letter quite safe. Luckily your letter came at breakfast-time this morning; but the next may not, and then mother would be sure to want to see it.—Love,
“VIOLET.”

The clock struck half-past six as she blotted the hasty scrawl. It was the time at which Roberts, punctual to the minute, cleared the letter-box in the hall. Stuffing her letter and the notes into a stout envelope, she addressed it and took it downstairs. As she had anticipated, Roberts had already cleared the box, and with several letters in his hand was making his way towards the door.

“Will you send this too, please, Roberts?” she said, giving it into his hand.

"Very good, miss," Roberts answered.

And so the money started on the first stage of its journey towards Wilfrid ; and Violet, relieved of the strain she had been suffering all day on his account, suddenly became conscious of an uncomfortable sense of apprehension on her own. She began to feel horribly nervous of the moment in which she would have to tell Sir Laurence that she had gone to his desk and rifled his private drawers.

Chapter X.

ETHEL GOES ON A JOURNEY.

DINNER that evening was a silent meal. Mrs. Nugent had a more than usually bad headache, and scarcely spoke. All Violet had undergone throughout the day had left her in no humour for conversation, and so there remained only Ethel, and she seemed to be as little desirous of talking as her aunt and cousin. She looked pale and tired, and ate as little as she spoke. Violet, glancing at her as they took their places at table, decided that Ethel was in a grumpy humour; Mrs. Nugent thought she was overtired, and having elicited the fact that Ethel had, according to her custom, spent the greater part of the day out of doors, expressed in her fatigued, gentle voice the opinion that she only wondered Ethel did not seriously injure herself by the amount of exercise she took. To that Ethel vouchsafed no reply, and the subject dropped.

But though Ethel had no intention of taking either her aunt or her cousin into her confidence, the truth was that she had passed, though for a totally different cause, a scarcely more pleasant day than Violet. And an event that had occurred during it had left her, not grumpy as

Violet imagined, nor yet, as her aunt supposed, tired, but for once with such an exceedingly small opinion of herself that she felt too dejected and humiliated to speak.

If any one had told her only that morning that she would behave in the way she had—that at a critical moment she would lose, not only her nerve, but apparently every scrap of common sense as well—she would have given them to understand, if not in so many words, then at any rate by her manner, that they were talking nonsense. And yet they would have been right. She had acted like an idiot, and was at least clear-sighted enough to perceive it. When the story got about, as it infallibly would, her uncle would be amused, Bates would grin from ear to ear, and the tale of how Miss Ethel Dunmayne, frightened by the braying of a donkey, had driven into a hedge, overturned a dog-cart, and seriously injured a valuable horse belonging to Mr. Sparrow of Ash Tree Farm, would be bruited throughout the whole countryside. The people who repeated that tale would not be adhering quite strictly to the truth, but they would be near enough to it to render contradiction futile, and Ethel writhed as in imagination she pictured the grin that would overspread the faces of those who repeated and those who listened to the tale. For it was well known that she, to put it mildly, rather fancied her driving, and to have allowed herself to be startled by a wretched donkey was too humiliating for anything. That the animal she had been driving had been so badly startled too that it had shied and reared up on its hind legs was beside the point. If she had not lost her

wits, her skill would, she felt confident, have been sufficient to have kept him under proper control.

This was what had happened. She had started off that morning for a long walk, and in the course of the ten-mile round she had set herself had passed Ash Tree Farm. Mr. Sparrow and a short, thick-set man, a stranger to Ethel, were standing at the gate looking at a horse and dog-cart. It was a smart turnout altogether. The dog-cart was apparently brand new, so was the harness; and though the horse had evidently been driven some distance that morning, his coat shone like satin, and showed signs of careful grooming. A stable boy stood at his head, listening stolidly to the colloquy that was being held between his master and the stranger.

"Seventy pounds as it stands," the latter was saying as Ethel approached—"harness, cart, horse, and everything; and if it wasn't that I wanted the ready money, I wouldn't sell the horse alone for that. Take it or leave it as you like, but I must have my answer at once. There's a man in Exeter who would buy it, and write me the cheque for it as soon as he could put pen to paper."

"I must have till the evening to decide," said Mr. Sparrow; and the other man, perceiving that he meant what he said, nodded acquiescence. He was a shrewd, business-like, but withal honest-looking man, with sharp gray eyes almost hidden beneath bushy eyebrows.

"Very good," he said. "I will leave it here with you till this afternoon. I have some business at Heavenden, so my time will not be wasted."

With a quick nod of his head he walked away, but before he had gone many yards he stopped and turned round.

"Of course, Sparrow," he said, "you are responsible for anything that may happen to the horse between now and six o'clock."

"Certainly," Mr. Sparrow called after him. "But I hope"—jokingly—"that he is not going to die between this and then, Mr. Wright."

"The horse is as sound as a bell," his owner answered emphatically. "I'm not a horse sharper, Mr. Sparrow, and I'm not trying to do you. If you don't like the horse you are welcome to leave him; but business is business, and I just wanted to make it clear that in taking him on trial you take all risks too."

"That is fair enough," said Mr. Sparrow, with a laugh. "You'll get your money or your horse and cart back this evening. But, as you know, I've as good as bought him, though I shan't give my final answer till my missus has seen him. She's at Heavenden now—gone to see her mother, who's sick—and I don't expect her back before dinner-time.—Good-morning, Miss Ethel," he added, as Mr. Wright walked briskly away up the road. "I didn't recognize you at first, though I might have known there were few young ladies but yourself who would be out a dirty, dull morning like this."

Mr. Sparrow was an elderly farmer between fifty and sixty years of age. His manner was quiet and somewhat phlegmatic. Though he now had the reputation of being a fairly prosperous man, he had not always been so, and it

was mainly owing to the very material help that Sir Laurence had given him at a time when a succession of bad seasons had left him in a critical state that he had been enabled, not only to keep his head above water, but so to improve his farm and stock that there was no danger of a few bad seasons dragging him under again. He was a man of few words, but he was grateful to Sir Laurence for his timely loan, which had been paid back to the last penny; and for his sake, no less than her own, he was always glad to see Ethel when she came out in the direction of the farm.

"Oh, it's all right for walking," Ethel said indifferently, thus briefly dismissing the topic of the weather. She could not be expected to feel much interest in it when a horse was at hand to be criticised and admired. "You are going to buy it, aren't you?" she asked.

Mr. Sparrow answered that he had practically made up his mind to do so. Mr. Wright, who was a rising tradesman in Exeter and a connection of his (Mr. Sparrow's) wife, was enlarging his premises, and had need of all the ready money he could raise. And preferring to get it by selling things he could do without than by borrowing it, he had decided to part with the horse and dog-cart that he had given to his wife on her last birthday—which, Ethel remarked, was rather hard on Mr. Wright's wife. Mr. Sparrow assured her, though, that Mrs. Wright was a careful, saving sort of woman, and would a great deal rather see her husband's business grow than spend any of his substance on mere pleasure.

Ethel listened to these details with exemplary patience, for before Mr. Sparrow had embarked on them he had asked her if he might have the honour of driving her part of the way home; and Ethel, who fully intended, before they had gone very far, to get him to change seats with her, had made answer that she would like a drive very much.

During the first mile or two they spoke little. Mr. Sparrow was studying his intended purchase with an absorbed mind; but gradually his brow relaxed, and when they had successfully mounted and descended several of the steep Devonshire hills without the horse showing any symptoms of undue fatigue, the farmer remarked, "He'll do," in a tone of decision which made Ethel feel pretty sure that Mrs. Sparrow's subsequent approval or disapproval would weigh little with her husband.

Then it was that Ethel judged the moment favourable to know whether she might not take the reins. For a moment—a short but perfectly perceptible moment—Mr. Sparrow hesitated, and Ethel's eyes widened a little. She was not accustomed to have her requests refused, and her manner indicated that she was surprised and a little offended.

Then Mr. Sparrow, helped perhaps by the expression on her face, recollected the great obligations he owed to Sir Laurence, and that to refuse this permission to his niece would be an ungracious thing.

"If the horse had been my own, miss, I should not have hesitated," he said, when they had changed places and he

had relinquished the reins. "But I wasn't sure for the moment what Mr. Wright would say."

"But the horse is practically your own," Ethel said. "And anyway," she added laughingly, her good humour quite restored as soon as she got her own way, "you have promised to make good any damage that may be done, so Mr. Wright can have no shadow of an objection to my driving."

Five minutes later the catastrophe that was destined to shatter Ethel's careless confidence in her driving powers for some time to come occurred. She had turned the horse's head in the direction of Heavenden again; for she had no real wish, as she informed Mr. Sparrow, to have her walk shortened, and as soon as she had driven back to the farm she would make her way home by the cliff path. A long stretch of level road, with two sharp turns ahead, lay before them, and with a little flick of her whip Ethel urged the horse to a quicker trot.

"I should be a little careful at the corner, miss," Mr. Sparrow said, rather anxiously; "there is a pile of stones at the bend, and the edge of the ditch on the other side is that soft from the rain that it would break away at a touch of the wheel."

"Oh, it will be all right," returned Ethel, who was of the opinion that the farmer had as yet hardly given the horse a fair chance of showing what he could do. Instead, therefore, of slackening at the corner, she took it at full speed, and narrowly escaped collision with a farm cart that

was lumbering slowly along, very much on the wrong side of the road.

"It would have been his fault if we had had an accident," she said indignantly. "I do wish people would remember the right side of the road, and keep to it."

Mr. Sparrow said nothing. Probably he thought that if the dog-cart had had a bad smash-up he would not have derived much consolation from the fact that it had been the farm cart that had been in the wrong, and it was more than probable that he began to regret having handed over the reins to the young lady at his side.

They were now progressing at a fairly rapid pace down an exceedingly muddy lane, and the dog-cart swayed and bumped over the big stones with which it was liberally strewn. There was another sharp bend at the bottom, but the turning was into the wide highroad running from Heavenden to Torleigh, and Mr. Sparrow felt that his anxieties would be lessened as soon as they were fairly in it.

They were about half way down the lane when a donkey, whose head protruded through the bare branches of the hedge, uttered a loud, discordant bray that caused two of its three hearers to start with surprise. Mr. Sparrow, who was the only one of the three who was not startled, was destined to receive a shock of another kind, for when the horse shied violently he was thrown out of the cart into the hedge, while Ethel, whose grasp on the reins had been momentarily loosened by the nervous jump which the donkey had caused her to give, recovered herself too late

to prevent the horse setting off at a wild gallop down the lane. If they had reached the highroad the ending might have been more serious than it was; but fifty yards from the end of the lane, and scarcely a hundred from the spot where Mr. Sparrow had been landed, the dog-cart tilted to an impossible angle on a big stone, crashed over, and the horse came down on his knees and nose. Mr. Sparrow escaped with nothing more serious than a shaking and a few scratches from the holly tree that had broken his fall; beyond a few bruises Ethel was equally fortunate—the five inches of soft mud was not without its advantages after all; but the dog-cart presented the appearance of a mere wreck, and the horse's knees were badly cut and sprained, if not actually broken. Until a vet. had overhauled him it would be impossible to estimate the extent of his injuries.

If Mr. Sparrow had overwhelmed her with reproaches Ethel would have borne them meekly; she was too utterly crushed and humiliated to have a word ready in self-defence. But Mr. Sparrow said nothing. He merely set himself to unbuckle, and where that was impossible, to cut away, the harness from the fallen horse, who was fortunately too stunned or too terrified to make matters worse for himself by struggling.

There was nothing Ethel could do. Even her intention of running to the farm and seeking assistance was rendered unnecessary by the arrival on the scene of a grocer's boy on a pony, who was riding round the outlying farms for orders, and who volunteered to go to Ash Tree Farm

and apprise them of the mishap that had befallen Mr. Sparrow.

"Tell them to send the hay wagon and three or four men," said Mr. Sparrow.

Disgust at her own incapacity and horror at the suffering it had brought upon the horse were for some time the predominant feelings in Ethel's mind. She did not seek, as many girls in her place would have sought, to find excuses for herself; she did not even try to shift any of the blame on to the wretched donkey, or yet on to the nervousness which had caused the horse to shy. A good driver with the finished skill she had always thought herself to possess would not have allowed such a catastrophe to come about, even though he had been as badly startled as she had been.

When, while they waited for the help that was to come, she said as much to Mr. Sparrow, she found that he was quite in accord with her on that point. But it was not one in which he was at the moment particularly interested. The results, and not the causes of the accident, were now his chief concern.

"Wright is a good man, but a hard one," he said. "And, after all, it is perfectly natural that he should expect to be paid in full."

"What!" Ethel exclaimed involuntarily, "do you mean to say that you will have to pay him that seventy pounds?"

A moment's reflection, however, convinced her, even before Sparrow's gloomy, acquiescent nod was completed, that Mr. Wright would certainly expect his seventy pounds. He

would not be content to receive his damaged goods back upon his hands.

"Then I shall pay it," she said instantly.

"You, Miss Ethel! Why should you do that? It was not your fault."

"Oh, you know as well as I do that it was," Ethel returned impatiently. "If you had been driving we should not have been taking the lane at such a rate, and you would have been able to pull up in time to prevent the general smash."

"I meant, Miss Ethel, that it was my fault for allowing you to drive. I should not dream for a moment of holding you in any way responsible, particularly—"

He did not finish the sentence. But Ethel guessed what it was that he had left unsaid. He would not expect her to make good the damage she had done because she was Sir Laurence's niece, and he had done so much for him that even the loss of the price of the horse and cart, serious enough though it was, could not weigh against the benefits he had received from Sir Laurence.

Ethel flushed crimson. It was bad enough to know that it was against his better judgment, and only to humour a whim of Sir Laurence's niece, that he had let her drive; it was unbearable to think that he was quite prepared to sustain the consequence of her action himself.

"Of course I shall pay," she said.

"But I should not like Sir Laurence—"

"It will not be Sir Laurence's money; it will be my own," she interrupted—"my very own. I have behaved

like an awful duffer, Mr. Sparrow, and you don't know how sick I feel with myself. So don't make me feel worse by refusing to let me pay."

But once Mr. Sparrow was assured that the money was to come out of Miss Dunmayne's own pocket he felt no scruple about taking it. It was only fair, after all, that she should be made to pay for her carelessness. If it had to come out of Sir Laurence's pocket it would have been a different matter altogether.

"You shall have the money by four o'clock," Ethel said; and she was as good as her word. But only she and the old jeweller at Torleigh who came out every week to wind Sir Laurence's clocks, and who had known Ethel since the days of her childhood, were acquainted with the fact that in order to raise that seventy pounds she had pledged her mother's diamond star.

Ethel brought the money to Ash Tree Farm in fourteen bank-notes for five pounds each, and she counted them out carefully to Mr. Sparrow, who received them with a few awkwardly expressed words of thanks.

"It goes against my grain to have you pay me like this, Miss Ethel," he said; for although he had thought it fair enough that she should give him the money when he did not seriously believe she would, now that it was actually in his hands he felt that she was being made to pay very heavily indeed for a few minutes' pleasure. "It goes against my grain, and that's a fact, for I hold that I was to blame in allowing an inexperienced young lady like yourself to drive a strange horse."

"An inexperienced young lady like yourself!" Ethel winced. That touched her to the quick. But, at any rate, she had atoned as far as it lay in her power for her mistake, and that was a satisfaction.

"By the way," she said, as she turned to go, "I don't want you to say anything about this to Sir Laurence."

"Very good, miss," Mr. Sparrow made answer.

Ethel felt that it would indeed be a come-down for her to have to confess the occurrences of the morning to her uncle. After such a disaster he might refuse to let her drive any one of his horses again. And, after all, she was perfectly justified in not telling him. She had been vain and conceited, but she had paid dearly enough for her wilfulness, and there was an end of the matter. Yet even while she argued thus, she knew that she would probably give her uncle a full account of the matter, and on the very first evening of his arrival too. No, that would not be possible: she would have left for Barnstow before he returned. That being the case, she was doubly glad that she had bound Mr. Sparrow to secrecy. If Sir Laurence had to hear the tale, she wanted to be the one to tell it to him; and it would be time enough to tell him when she came back from Barnstow. A garbled account of the accident might get about the neighbourhood before then, but Sir Laurence would not be likely to hear it; and the only person who could have given him an accurate description of what had actually occurred had promised to say nothing.

But that evening as he sat smoking his after-supper pipe, Mr. Sparrow, ruminating in silence over their exciting drive and its sudden termination, wondered whether he would be justified in keeping that same secret. It was strange that Miss Ethel should have asked him to say nothing to Sir Laurence. How had she come by all that money? It was not usual for young ladies of eighteen to be able to lay their hands, at a moment's notice as it were, on seventy pounds. She could not have got it from her uncle, for he was away. If the bank-notes had not been in Wright's hands by that time, Mr. Sparrow would have taken them back to Ethel in the morning; but as he could not do that, he did what was in his estimation the next best thing to do. He went to Nutcombe Hall directly after breakfast, to ask Ethel to allow him to retract his promise to say nothing to Sir Laurence, because, on second thoughts, he did not feel justified in taking such a large sum of money from her without the knowledge or consent of her guardian.

But early though he was, he was not early enough to catch Ethel; for Miss Dunmayne, Roberts informed him, had gone out riding. She would certainly be back to lunch, though. That information, however, was of no use to Mr. Sparrow. He was going into Plymouth by the mid-day express, and would be too late to see Miss Dunmayne before she in her turn went off by train. He hesitated for a moment on the doorstep, trying to frame a message which, though it should leave Roberts ignorant

of its meaning, would convey to Ethel the knowledge that he had been obliged to reconsider his promise to say nothing to Sir Laurence of the transaction that had taken place between them. But though he cudgelled his brains assiduously, he was unable to find a phrase that would suit his requirements; and finally, with a slow nod to Roberts, who had been blandly waiting for him to speak, he turned and went down the drive. After all, he could write and tell Miss Ethel of his determination, and leave it to her to tell Sir Laurence.

It so happened, however, that the up train from Plymouth met the down express from Paddington at Newton, and spying Mr. Sparrow on the platform, Sir Laurence called him into his carriage in order that they might have a chat about farming matters during the journey to Torleigh. Such a favourable opportunity of unburdening his mind was not to be lost, and long before Torleigh was reached Sir Laurence was in full possession of an account of the disaster of the preceding day, and of the prompt measures which Ethel had taken to retrieve the loss she had occasioned the farmer.

"If my niece told you—and you say that she did most distinctly tell you—that the money was hers, you may rest assured that she spoke the truth," Sir Laurence said quietly, when Mr. Sparrow had finished. "In any case, I should have fully compensated you for the loss she caused you, so she has only anticipated me."

And that was all he would say on the subject; and

for the rest of the way the two men spoke on other topics. But in his own mind Sir Laurence was puzzled to know by what means Ethel had obtained such a large sum as seventy pounds. His first inquiry on entering the house was for his niece. For a moment he had forgotten that her arrangements had obliged her to leave before he returned. Roberts's answer recalled the fact to his mind.

"Miss Ethel went to Frimly by the 2.19 to play in a hockey match, Sir Laurence. She took her trunk with her, and left it in the cloak-room at Newton, so as to save her the journey back to Torleigh. Then she was to catch the 6.39 from Newton to Exeter. Here is a note, Sir Laurence, which Miss Ethel told me to give you the moment you came in."

Because he had looked them out and written them down for her himself, Roberts had Ethel's trains at his finger ends; and if her arrangements had been strictly adhered to, she would have been at that time speeding over the rails on her way to Barnstown.

But she had been unlucky enough to miss her train at Frimly, with the consequence that all her plans had been upset. The rest of the hockey team had gone home by an earlier train; but as she was not going back to Torleigh, and could not get on from Newton until the 6.39, she had accepted the invitation of one of the Frimly eleven to have tea with her, and to wait at her house until her train was due. And she had waited there too long. The Frimly girl was so amusing and enter-

taining that time had slipped by unheeded, and though Ethel had raced to the station, she had arrived there just in time to see the tail lights of the train vanishing into the tunnel at the end of the platform. Half an hour's wait in the cold and draughty little station followed; and though Ethel was well wrapped up—she wore a white woollen sweater over her flannel shirt and under her coat—the boisterous cold wind seemed to penetrate every corner of the dreary little waiting-room, and she shivered more than once.

Further annoyances were in store for her. By the time she got to Newton the 6.39 had gone, and in losing it she had, as the booking-clerk informed her, missed the last connecting train on to Barnstow from Exeter. She might go to Exeter if she wished, but she could not get another train on to Barnstow that evening.

As there was obviously no use in going to Exeter if she could not get farther, Ethel, in no very enviable frame of mind, took a ticket to Torleigh. It was horrid to have all one's careful plans upset just as a result of being late by a few minutes. However, it could not be helped; there was no use in being cross, and there was great compensation in the thought that she would be able to tell her uncle all about her accident herself. There was no need for her to wire to Ida, for there had been a talk of a possible hockey match on the morrow, which, had it come off, would have delayed her arrival in Barnstow for another twenty-four hours, and she had written to Ida not to be surprised if she did not turn up.

By the time she got to Torleigh it was raining, and the wind was blowing such a hurricane that, even had a cab been waiting in the little station yard, it would have been exceedingly doubtful whether the driver would have accepted a fare to Nutcombe. But no cabs, unless specially ordered, met such a late train as the 6.39 from Newton was deemed, and Ethel, passing unrecognized in the rain and darkness, left the station and set out on her three-mile walk. And that is how it was that Roberts, though he spoke to the best of his belief when he said that Miss Ethel was on her way to Barnstown, came to be so entirely mistaken.

"How are Mrs. Nugent and Miss Violet?" asked his master. "Is Miss Violet out?"

"Miss Violet is in her studio, I think, Sir Laurence, and Mrs. Nugent is lying down. She has been very poorly, off and on, since you went away. Shall I bring you some tea, Sir Laurence?"

But Sir Laurence, with a glance at the clock, the hands of which pointed to past seven, declined tea. He had letters to read, perhaps to answer, and would devote himself to his correspondence until dinner-time. Roberts poked the already blazing fire into greater activity, wheeled his master's favourite chair on to the hearth-rug, saw that the reading lamp on the desk was in order, and then left the room.

Sir Laurence seated himself in his cosy chair with a sigh of appreciation; he was always glad to get home, even after a short absence. But what a difference Ethel

made in the house! He missed the warm, affectionate welcome she would have given him. Had she been at home, it was little enough time that he would have had to read his letters. She would have been sitting on the hearthrug, or have been perched on the arm of his chair, telling him, as she would herself have expressed it, "all that had happened to everything" since he went away. However, she would be back again in less than a week, and it was selfish of him even to miss her when she was enjoying herself so much. Meanwhile he would read her note, and see what she had to say for herself.

"DARLING UNCLE LAURIE," it ran, "isn't it a shame that you should come back and not have me to gossip with the first evening! Before I do come back, I expect you will hear what I have been up to since you went away, so I may just as well tell you that I had an awful smash-up yesterday when I was driving Sparrow's dog-cart, and that I have had to pay damages. But, mind you, I have paid it myself out of my very own money, so that is all square. I thought I had better tell you this, or you would be wondering how in the wide world I had raised it. Lots of love,

ETHEL."

A smile crept over Sir Laurence's face as he read, not without difficulty, the hastily scribbled note. Ethel appeared to be under the impression that she had fully enlightened him as to the means by which she had obtained the money, whereas it was as much of a mystery

to him now as it had been before. Perhaps, however, she had saved it out of her dress allowance, or perhaps the cheque he had given her at Christmas, or part of the liberal gift of twenty pounds that he had made her to defray the cost of her trip to Barnstow, had helped to pay for it. At any rate he felt convinced that it was carelessness only that had kept her from being more explicit. She would give him all details next time he saw her.

Dismissing the matter from his mind, he took the bundle of letters that Roberts had given him out of his pocket, and ran his eye over their envelopes with an expression which, a trifle absent at first, changed suddenly into one of frowning attention as his gaze lighted upon one addressed in a handwriting that was evidently familiar.

"Ha!" he exclaimed half aloud, "I wonder what this rascal has to say for himself now. Surely he has not the effrontery to persist in his demands after I have told him that I have kept his original estimate!"

Evidently, however, Sir Laurence's correspondent did possess that same effrontery, and it was with a frown on his face that Sir Laurence got up and went to his desk, intending to assure himself that the documentary evidence by which he could resist the unjust claim was in his safe keeping.

He lowered the flap, and was in the act of searching for his own keys, when his hand was arrested by the sight of Ethel's golf keys hanging in the lock—a mute witness to the fact that some unauthorized person had

paid a visit to his desk in his absence. He recognized them at a glance, and his heart sank as, the business that had brought him to his bureau forgotten, he stood and looked at them in a grave, sad silence.

The act of carelessness which had caused her to leave them there was so like Ethel. But why had she told Mr. Sparrow that the money she gave him was her own? And why had she repeated that untruth in her letter to him? If it had not been that she had assured him that she had paid the farmer out of money that belonged strictly to her, he would have thought that Mr. Sparrow had been mistaken in asserting that she had said so to him; but there was no room for doubt in his mind that Ethel had, and for the first time in her life, told him a most glaring untruth—Ethel, whom he always believed to be the very soul of honour!

It was a bitter blow to him, one beside which the loss of the money sank into utter insignificance. His own Ethel to have told him such a lie! He could not question the evidence of his own eyes. She had wilfully deceived both Mr. Sparrow and himself. Feeling suddenly very tired and dispirited, he sat down in his revolving chair, and rested his head wearily on his hand.

He was roused from his mournful reflections by a timid, hasty knock at the door; and in response to his invitation to come in, Violet entered the room. Ever since her uncle's return she had been nerving herself in the shelter of her studio to come down and confess the

misdeemeanour of which she had been guilty ; but though she had twice reached the head of the stairs, and had once even got half way down them, her courage had failed her on each occasion, and she had beaten a hasty retreat to the studio again, there to upbraid herself for her cowardice, to assure herself that she had done nothing so very wrong after all, and that Sir Laurence, though he might be angry at first, would soon forgive her. And in any case, since confess she must, it would be an infinitely better policy to confess of her own free will than to have the truth extorted from her after Sir Laurence had discovered his loss himself.

It was no exaggeration to say that during the last twenty-four hours she had not known a single happy moment ; waking or sleeping, the remembrance of the disclosure that hung over her head had been with her, and she had lived in terrified dread of the moment that was now at hand.

And it was with the courage born of utter desperation that she had at last, after those abortive attempts, screwed up enough resolution to knock and walk into the room. Her knees trembled under her, and though she became conscious before she was half way across the floor that she had left the door open, she felt physically incapable of turning back to shut it. And for once Sir Laurence, though, as a rule, he had a strong objection to any one entering and leaving rooms without closing the door behind him, failed to notice the omission. And that may have been due either to the fact that he was too absorbed

in his own painful thoughts to observe external things, or because the far end of the room near the door was in deep shadow, neither the flickering firelight nor the rays of the shaded reading lamp that stood on the top of the bureau reaching to it.

"Ah, Violet, is that you, dear?" Sir Laurence said, rousing himself from his abstraction as she came towards him. "I was wondering a few minutes ago why you had not come to see me."

"Why I had not come to see you!" Violet repeated in a faltering voice, her guilty conscience immediately causing her to jump to the conclusion that her uncle had discovered his loss, and so forestalled her confession. Even as she spoke, her downcast eyes fell on the tell-tale keys hanging in the lock, and with a little gasp she realized that her hasty conclusion was indeed a correct one, and that Sir Laurence knew all, and now wanted an explanation of her conduct. It did not then occur to her to wonder why he made so sure that she was the culprit. All she thought of at the moment was to get her confession over as speedily as possible.

"Oh, the keys," she said, as well as her shaking voice would allow. Her uncle looked so grave and stern, that her fear of him increased every moment. "So then—so then you know all about it—the money—that is gone, I mean?"

"Yes, I know all about it," Sir Laurence said, with a heavy sigh. Nothing Ethel had done since, at the age of nine, a mischievous, wilful child, she had come to live with him, had caused him so much sorrow as this.

"And are you very, very angry?" Violet asked, in the same shaking voice. The slow, sad tone in which he spoke terrified her even more than his harshest anger could have done. Much as she had dreaded this interview, it was surpassing her utmost imagining. She felt that in her uncle's eyes she had sinned beyond hope of forgiveness.

Outside the storm was rising, and the whole force of the westerly gale seemed to spend itself against the big windows of the study, which rattled and shook in their casements, while the rain beat noisily on the panes. Nutcombe House, when the sea breeze blew from the west, was never a very quiet house. It seemed to be the first object on which a storm paused to break its wrath as it tore inland, and it would howl round the walls, burst in through the windows, if perchance any were left open, and come in great gusts down the chimneys, until the doors shook on their hinges, mats curled up and drifted off to places where they were never laid, and the carpets swayed as if a restless sea were underneath them. But the wind got its best chance if the hall door was left open. Then it would rush into the hall with all the boisterous eagerness of a living thing kept against its will outside, and would overturn tables, make the heavy picture-frames sway out to the length of their cords and clatter back against the wall, whisk table-covers and vases to the ground, and then, sweeping upstairs, set doors and windows banging in every direction.

So when Ethel came into the house, and forgetting to

shut the door after her, admitted the full fury of the west wind also, it was no wonder that, in the noise and commotion it made as it swept through the house, her own entrance and footsteps across the hall should have passed unheard. But Ethel, who had had the howling, raging wind for her constant companion during the best part of the last hour, scarcely heeded it now, and hurried towards the study, the door of which stood invitingly ajar. But before she had taken more than a single step across the threshold she was suddenly arrested by the scene that was being enacted there. Within the little circle of light shed by the shaded reading lamp on the desk, she could see that her uncle was looking exceedingly grave, and that Violet's face was pale and agitated. And even as Ethel brought herself up suddenly, Violet, putting her two hands to her face, began to cry and sob. Evidently her cousin had got herself into trouble of some sort, and feeling that her presence would be an embarrassment to both of them, Ethel took a quick backward step, and in another moment would have been out of the room and out of hearing, when the sound of her own name rooted her to the spot.

"I am more grieved than angry," Sir Laurence was saying, in reply to Violet's faltering query as to whether he was angry with her. "I am cut to the heart. It is the first time in her life that Ethel has ever told me or any one else a lie; and I feel now as though I could never trust her again. Why could she not have waited until I came home? I would have seen that the right



She was suddenly arrested by the scene that was
being enacted there.

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thing was done to Sparrow ; she might have made sure of that. But to open my desk with her own keys, to take my money, and then to lie—not once, but twice—about it ! Why, yesterday, this morning, even an hour ago, I should have as soon believed myself capable of telling a desperate falsehood as have believed it possible of Ethel.”

With lightning-like rapidity Ethel grasped the situation. Some one, she did not care who, had told her uncle that she had broken open his desk and stolen his money, and he believed the tale ! Amazing, incredible as it seemed to Ethel, he believed it. A furious feeling of anger assailed her. How dared he think such things of her ? Her first impulse was to rush into the room, and confront him and Violet, who was now sobbing unrestrainedly, face to face. But a sort of cold fury, more overwhelming even than the hot rage with which she had first grasped the fact that her uncle was condemning her unheard, succeeded, and that curious pride which was so strong in her, and which made it so repugnant to her to stand up in her own defence, dominated the impulse to set matters right with a word. Few people had ever seen Ethel in such a fit of passion, speechless though it was, as possessed her then, for it was but rarely that the slumbering demon of haughty pride that underlay her careless, easy-going nature was roused. And it may be safely said that never in the nineteen years of life had it been as effectually stirred up as it was at that moment. She felt as though she hated her uncle—as though she never wished to speak to him again. Curiously enough, she was not

conscious of entertaining any anger against Violet; she was altogether beneath contempt.

For nearly half a minute after Sir Laurence had finished speaking Ethel stood in the darkened doorway, as still as though she had been literally frozen into silence by his words. Only her eyes, ablaze with fury, showed the tumult that raged within her. One thing was certain, if her uncle could never, as he had just said, trust her again, she could certainly never love him again; and that being so, the only thing for her to do was to leave his house at once, and for ever.

Her resolution was no sooner taken than it was acted upon. And scarcely three minutes after she had burst into the house full of eager delight at the thought of seeing her uncle again, she dashed out again, her heart so charged with wrath and anger that she scarcely noticed, and certainly did not heed, the fact that, though the wind had not bated in the least, the rain was falling in drenching torrents. Had the storm been ten times worse than it was—had every step of the way been fraught with peril in the shape of crashing trees and falling thunderbolts or forked lightning—she yet would have fought her way through it all to the station. So it was not likely that mere wind and rain, however violent, could deter her. Before she had gone half a mile she was soaked to the skin, her sodden skirt clung round her and made walking a matter of serious difficulty, and little rivulets of water poured down on all sides of her flat cloth cap. Luckily the wind was behind

her, and the more terrific the gusts with which it swept along the bare highroad, the more help it was to her.

Though her anger against her uncle did not abate one whit, the furious blind fit of passion that had driven her, without one moment's reflection, out of the house subsided after a while sufficiently to allow of her making her plans for the future. Without being conscious of any settled idea as to what she should do when she got there, she had struck into the road to Torleigh. Now she knew that she meant to take the night train to London. Arrived there she would go into lodgings, and look out for a situation as governess or companion until she came of age. Luckily she had enough money for her present needs. The twenty pounds that her uncle had given her for her week in Barnstown was in her pocket; and as regarded luggage, she had a trunk full of clothes at Newton. It was a maxim of Mrs. Mudge's that it was always better to take more things than one wanted on a visit than to risk leaving things behind that one might want, and in accordance with that policy she had packed the trunk with enough clothes to last her young mistress several months.

The mail train left Torleigh about nine, and it was nearly certain to wait long enough at Newton to enable her to take her trunk out of the cloak-room. Paddington would be reached about five or six, she supposed, and she would remain in the waiting-room until a more seasonable hour, when she would go out in search of lodgings. This time no hitch occurred in her plans. She duly caught

the train at Torleigh, where, with her peaked cap drawn over her eyebrows, and the collar of her coat buttoned up to her chin as a protection against the weather, she passed unrecognized, claimed her luggage at Newton, and arrived at Paddington with the early mail. If she had had any attention to spare for external matters, she would have found the journey unspeakably cold and comfortless. Wet through as she was when she took her seat in the train, she soon became chilled to the bone; and though the heavy travelling rug that she took into the carriage at Newton and wrapped well round her warmed her somewhat, it was but a damp, unpleasant warmth, which she would almost as soon have been without. But all through the night the fire of resentment against her uncle burned steadily, and far from regretting the step she had taken, she rejoiced in the fact that every moment carried her farther and farther away from him. How dared he believe, she asked herself passionately, that she would steal and lie? She, Ethel Dunmayne, steal and lie! Steal and lie! the heavy wheels of the carriage seemed to beat out the three words in endless repetition. Wearied out at length by sheer bodily fatigue—her mind could have dwelt for many hours more on her wrongs without growing tired—she fell asleep; and as for a tip of half a crown the guard had locked her in by herself, she slept undisturbed until, some time after seven o'clock, and more than an hour overdue owing to the bad weather, Paddington was reached.

Violet would have deemed herself fortunate if she

could have slept but half as soundly as Ethel that night. But though she lay warm and dry in her cosy bed, instead of rattling through the night stretched on the seat of a cold railway carriage, she scarcely slept at all. Again and again she bemoaned the fatal cowardice that had led her, when full confession trembled on her lips, to shirk it, and to seize for herself the chance of escape that Sir Laurence, by his unexpected supposition that Ethel was the person who had rifled his desk, had unwittingly given her. As she tossed restlessly to and fro, she felt that she would have given anything in the world to be able to go back to the moment when she had first entered her uncle's study. Oh, if only the chance were given to her again, how very differently she would act! And what made her position worse was the consciousness that Sir Laurence would have been so glad and relieved to find that he had misjudged Ethel that he would have been very lenient to her. The whole scene seemed to pass so quickly, that before she had well realized what, by her silence and tears, more than by actual speech, she was doing, she had found herself outside the door and committed to a course of deception that she had certainly never contemplated. Yet it was useless to disguise from herself the fact that it was with a feeling of trembling hope that she had caught those words of Sir Laurence's which had shown her how far he was from connecting the presence of the keys in his desk with her. After that, the downward course had been fatally easy, the upward one impossible to climb. But now, reviewing it

all wearily, and for the hundredth time at least, it seemed to her that if Sir Laurence had not risen abruptly as he finished and left the study, she would have forced her stammering tongue to tell him the truth. But the continued banging of the front door had taken him out to the hall, there to demand irritably of Roberts why it had not been kept shut.

"The wind must have blown it clean open, Sir Laurence," Roberts had answered respectfully. "I shut it when you came in half an hour ago, and nobody has gone in or out since."

"You had better lock it, then," Sir Laurence had replied; and while the servant hastened to obey him, he went back to his study.

"Oh, if only I had told him then!" moaned Violet, as she buried her hot face in the pillow; "even then it would not have been too late." But she had let that chance pass also.

"There, there," Sir Laurence had said, not unkindly, but in rather a weary tone, when on re-entering the room he had found her still standing crying by his desk. "There is no need for you to cry, my dear. You may leave me now. I have some letters to write."

And she had very gladly seized the opportunity to escape, and had hurried out of his presence; and by so doing had converted what might, had she even then spoken, have been called hesitation and nervous irresolution to own her fault, into a definite act of deception. And such a useless deception too. For, of course,

when Ethel came back she would deny with scornful emphasis the mere idea that she had taken money from her uncle's desk, and it was not likely that Sir Laurence would doubt her word. The raging, howling wind seemed a fit accompaniment to her miserable thoughts—if they would have let her sleep, the storm would not have permitted her to do so; and for hour after hour she lay awake in the darkness, a prey to her vain regrets for the past, and her poignant fears for the future. She told herself in a half whisper that could scarcely have been heard above the blankets, that she would go to Sir Laurence the very first thing in the morning, and make a full confession to him. Yet, even while her lips formed the resolve, she knew in her heart that she would never have the courage to do so. Then what was she to do? Wait until Ethel came home to scout the notion that she was responsible for the theft, stand by in agonizing suspense while the matter was thoroughly sifted and the blame at last brought home to her? No, she could not do that either. Then what was she to do? It was some time before she realized that those were the only two alternatives open to her—to confess, or to be found out. The thought of either caused her to shiver and shake, while hot tears of self-pity rolled down her cheeks and wet her pillow. Her original delinquency, that of taking the money, seemed, compared to the later one of trying to shift the blame on to some one else's shoulders, to have faded into comparative insignificance. After all,

there were excuses to be made for that—it was not for her own sake she had taken the money—but for this there were none. Perhaps, for the first time in her life, Violet was thoroughly, heartily ashamed of herself. The scorn that Sir Laurence, and Ethel, and any one and every one would entertain for her when her deception came to light could not exceed the profound contempt she felt for herself. She had always known that she was given to exaggeration on the one hand and to an occasional suppression of facts on the other, but in neither of these tendencies had she seen very much harm. But this was very different. Sheer cowardice had led her to embark on such a horrible course of double-dealing that she felt as though she would never again recover her self-respect.

“I never thought I was this sort of girl,” she moaned. “I knew I was not perhaps as truthful as Ethel, but I did not know I was quite as mean as I really am.”

It was small matter for wonder that the revelation of what she had been capable of, and the humiliation she felt in consequence, alternating with the dread of the inevitable exposure that awaited her on the morrow, combined to make her pass a sleepless night. But as day was breaking she fell into a short, troubled slumber, from which she was roused by the sound of the breakfast gong. Raising herself on her elbow, she looked at her watch, and saw that it was indeed nine o'clock. What could have made her sleep so late? Then like an avalanche her troubles swept back to her mind, and with

a sound between a sigh and a groan she let her head fall on to the pillow again. Once more the two equally distasteful alternatives that awaited her presented themselves to her mind. Should she confess, or should she wait to be found out? Ethel would not be back for a week. She had, at all events, then, a few days' respite. Yet the longer she waited the worse it would be for her in the end. Oh for the courage to go at once to her uncle, confess her fault, and earn, if not pardon, at any rate peace for her distracted mind! Slowly, wearily she got herself out of bed. She was irretrievably late for breakfast now, so there was no use in hurrying. As that thought occurred to her she was startled by the loud pealing of a bell. It was the dining-room bell, and it must have been pulled forcibly indeed for its echoes to penetrate to the upstairs regions. Surely Sir Laurence was not sending in anger to know why she was late! But no one came to her room, and Violet proceeded languidly to dress herself, too absorbed in her painful thoughts even to pause in self-pity when she saw how pale and heavy-eyed she looked. Scarcely two minutes had elapsed since the bell had been rung so violently, when the sound of wheels scrunching on the gravel below sent her to the window with a sudden startled fear that Ethel, hearing in some way of what she was suspected, had returned to defend herself. But as Violet peered through the slats of the venetian-blinds she saw that it was only the dog-cart being driven rapidly round from the stables, so rapidly indeed that she had barely time to catch a

glimpse of it before it disappeared beneath the window. If it was for the dog-cart Sir Laurence had rung, his orders must have urged great haste. The wheels were scarcely silent before they were in motion again. Sir Laurence was driving now, while Bates, in a shabby working suit, sat beside him. But that did not surprise Violet so much as the rate at which Sir Laurence drove. The horse fairly flew down the long drive. Craning her head sideways, Violet could see it turn out of the gates, and tear up the steep, short hill leading to the high-road at full gallop.

Something must be in the wind surely to cause Sir Laurence to drive in that reckless manner. Perhaps important business had called him back to London. In that case, it was out of the question that she could make her confession to him that morning. In spite of the sudden bound of relief which she experienced as she realized that, she tried to persuade herself that had it not been placed beyond her power she would certainly have told him the truth directly after breakfast.

Once or twice when she had been as late as she was this morning, Ruby had knocked and asked if she would like her breakfast in her room. But to-day she finished her dressing undisturbed by any such query; and it was nearly ten o'clock before she was dressed. Until she opened her door she had not noticed that an unusual stillness lay over the house. But as she walked down the passage, it struck her that for any sounds she heard she might have been alone in the house. There were no

maids at work in any of the bedrooms, but in the hall she came upon Ruby and one of the housemaids whispering together in a corner. Their faces were pale and scared, and they looked up in an excited way as Violet passed through. Beyond a surprised glance in their direction, Violet took no notice of them, and passed on to the breakfast room, on the threshold of which she paused in astonishment at the unwonted sight that met her eyes.

Mrs. Mudge sat in the place lately vacated by her master. The *Western Morning News* was spread on the table before her, but she was not reading it. Her arms were propped on the elbows of his chair, her head was buried in her hands, and she was rocking herself to and fro, and crying as though her heart would break. Roberts stood beside her, and Violet looked again, unable to believe that she saw aright; but yes, Roberts, the grave, emotionless old butler, was crying too. Tears were raining down his face.

In amazement Violet looked from one to the other.

"What—what is the matter?" she asked. "Has anything happened?"

Neither Mrs. Mudge nor Roberts answered her. It was doubtful if Mrs. Mudge even heard her or knew that she was in the room. Twice Roberts essayed to speak, but each time the words died away in his throat. He pointed with a trembling hand towards the paper, and turned to the window.

But before Violet could reach the paper, steps sounded

in the passage outside, and Ruby, her eyes inflamed and red with tears, came into the room.

“Oh, haven’t you heard, Miss Violet?” she blurted out, bursting into fresh tears as she spoke. “Miss Ethel is dead. She was burned to death last night, with hundreds and hundreds of others, in the theatre at Barnstown.”

Chapter XI.

ETHEL SEEKS A SITUATION.

EIGHT o'clock on a raw, foggy January morning is a somewhat unseasonable time to set out on a search for lodgings in London ; but though Ethel, divested now of the rug in which she had passed the night, shivered and yawned as she sat in the growler that was taking her and all her belongings on that quest, it was neither of the inclemency of the weather nor of the unsuitability of the hour that she was thinking.

For a girl who had been sheltered and guarded all her life as Ethel had been, she was singularly capable of looking after herself ; and whereas many other girls who had rashly quitted home in the way she had might have felt terrified at what they had done, and helpless and bewildered as to their next step, she experienced absolutely no misgivings or trepidations about the future. " Alone in London, hungry, cold, and tired, without a friend to whom she could go for comfort or advice, she felt perfectly able to manage her own affairs and to assume the direction of her own life.

To find suitable rooms not too dear, but in a nice, clean neighbourhood, was obviously her first work, and after

a glance at the cabman she decided to ask him if he knew of any such rooms.

He was a small, wizen-faced man, and there was a monkey-like shrewdness and alertness about him that reminded Ethel of Bates. It seemed that he knew of the very rooms that would suit her; and when the porter, having placed her rugs inside, had gone off in search of her trunk, the little man leaned down from the box and gave her further details in a rich brogue that placed his nationality beyond doubt.

"The very rooms," he repeated. "A nice bedroom and a rale illigant little parlour. Little is it, I'm saying! Sure it's a handsome apartment with sofys and chairs, a rale Brussels carpet, and a mirror over the chimney-piece that hasn't its like in London."

"And the landlady, and the cooking, and—and all that?" asked Ethel, feeling that it behoved her to be business-like.

"The landlady is the kindest and best of craythurs, and the cliverist cook in England. Why, if I were just to make mention of half the great swells in London as she has been cook to in her time, it's surprised and unbelavin' you would be."

That was probably true enough, Ethel thought, with the glimmer of a smile. "And the price," she asked, "how much?"

The little man rubbed his chin thoughtfully with the palm of his hand and looked shrewdly at Ethel.

"Ah, the price," he was beginning dubiously, when, trundled on a barrow, Ethel's big trunk with its leather straps

and it's E. D. in big yellow letters came up the platform. His countenance brightened.

"The price we will lave to Mrs. Dennis Murphy," he said briskly; "it's not robbing you she will be."

"She's a friend of yours, then," said Ethel, beginning to understand why he had shown such alacrity to give her the information she required.

"I'd scorn to dayceive you," he answered. "Mrs. Dennis Murphy is my brother's widow, and a sight of sorrow she has seen, poor sowl."

So it was on the recommendation of Mrs. Dennis Murphy's brother-in-law that Ethel was driving through the dim, foggy streets towards her residence, which she had been informed was in Pemberton Terrace—"the most convaynient, illigant, and healthiest street" in the whole of London.

Convenient and healthy the street might be; but as for elegant, though she was not quite sure what the word as applied to a street meant, she doubted its being applicable in any sense to Pemberton Terrace.

It was a long row of narrow, dingy houses, faced by another row of equally tall and dingy houses, and at least every other window on either side displayed a card, sometimes two, or even three, advertising the fact that desirable apartments were to be had, furnished or unfurnished, with or without attendance, within. Evidently Mrs. Dennis Murphy had many rivals in her line of business. Half way down the street the cab drew up with a jerk, and getting nimbly down from the box, Mr. Murphy darted

up the steps and rang the bell. It was opened almost immediately by a tall, thin slip of a girl, about Ethel's own age, with a pale, delicate-looking face lit by a pair of serious brown eyes.

She had a neat, tidy appearance, and her dress was covered by a clean, coarse apron.

"You have come to breakfast, I hope, Uncle Pat," she said, kissing him affectionately. "The kettle is boiling, and it won't take me a minute to fry you a bit of bacon."

"No, my dear; I have had breakfast this hour and more. It's to bring you a lodger I've come—a real live lodger, with a grand trunk, and a power of luggage inside."

The girl's eyes followed the wave of his hand, and they flashed delighted surprise when she saw that the cab had indeed an occupant.

"But does the lady know—?" she began doubtfully.

"The young lady knows she will be more comfortable here than anywhere else in the whole of London," Mr. Pat Murphy replied. "You show her in, Kate, my dear, and I will take the box down from the cab."

Ethel submitted passively to be thus taken possession of, and allowed herself and her belonging to be conveyed across the pavement and into the house. She was only now beginning to realize that she felt desperately tired, and that her head ached rather badly.

Two rooms on the ground floor, connected by folding doors, were shown to her. The front one looked on to the street and was furnished as a sitting-room; the back

one—into the grimy patch of earth which probably went by the name of garden—was the bedroom.

"The rent of the two," the girl volunteered, for Ethel did not ask, "is twenty-five shillings a week."

She searched Ethel's face with her anxious brown eyes as she spoke, evidently fearing that she had asked too much.

"Very well," Ethel answered, with so much indifference that Mr. Murphy, staggering into the room at the moment with her trunk, told his niece in a whisper that she might have asked two pounds a week and got it.

Kate looked distressed, but meeting Ethel's eyes, which were smiling, her embarrassment vanished.

"You mustn't think uncle is really grasping, miss," she said. "He wouldn't take a penny he hadn't fairly earned."

"In course not," said Mr. Murphy indignantly, who was now unbuckling the strap of Ethel's trunk. "I wouldn't imperil my sowl for the sake of a penny. It would have to be made worth my while," he added.

"I should like a fire, please," Ethel said, walking into the sitting-room and glancing with a shiver at the empty grate.

"Yes, miss," Mr. Murphy answered, as if she had addressed him; "but, of course, you understand that fires is extry. It is the rule everywhere. Sixpence a scuttle."

Though Ethel felt in no humour for laughing, she could scarcely help being amused at Mr. Murphy's anxiety to do the best possible for his relatives.

Surely, she thought, Mrs. Dennis Murphy would be able to look after her own interests. But in that it appeared she was mistaken. Mrs. Dennis Murphy had gone for change to the country for a few weeks' visit to her native village, which was in Gloucestershire, and Kate was in temporary charge of No. 33 Pemberton Terrace; so that Ethel would not be able to test the culinary skill of the cleverest cook in England, or to have the privilege of making the acquaintance of the nicest landlady in London.

Mr. Murphy had the grace to look a little ashamed of himself when Kate stated the fact that her mother was away, but was reassured when he saw that Ethel received it with the same calmness as she had the price of the rooms and the news that fires were extra.

"A rare lady," he whispered to his niece in the passage just prior to his departure, "and a jewel of a lodger. Kape her as long as you can. I'm thinking your mother will be plazed when she knows how famously you're doing."

While Kate bustled to and fro, full of the work which the coming of this unexpected but most welcome lodger had entailed upon her, Ethel sat in an antimacassar bedecked chair of stamped green velvet before the newly-kindled fire. It took some time to blaze up, and meanwhile the room was desperately cold.

"You would like some breakfast, miss, if you're just off a journey, I expect," Kate said, pausing beside her. "Shall I make you some tea, and boil you an egg? You look fair done up."

It was doubtless want of food, Ethel reflected, that made her feel so queer and unlike herself. She had had nothing since four o'clock yesterday, and then only a little tea and cake. Breakfast would set her right again.

But when, after an interval of a quarter of an hour, Kate reappeared with a tray, on which a brown teapot, some slices of toast, a pat of butter, and an egg were neatly set out, Ethel found, greatly to her surprise, that she had no appetite whatever. She drank one cup of rather flavourless tea mixed with milk of more than doubtful quality, and decided that after all she was not hungry. She would go and change. It was not to be expected that one could feel fresh and well in clothes that one had travelled in all night.

Kate brought her a can of hot water and a bath, and Ethel unpacked a change of linen, discarded the short, crumpled skirt, still damp from the soaking it had received the previous evening, and returned to the sitting-room in about an hour's time in a very different condition, as far as raiment was concerned, from that in which she had left it. But the mere act of changing her clothes and taking a bath had not had the invigorating effect on her system that she had confidently expected. Her head ached badly, her limbs felt stiff and sore, and, in spite of a half-formed resolution to go out at once in search of some employment, she sat down again in the green velvet chair, and before she fully realized what was happening to her, fell fast asleep.

It was past one when she awoke; the fire had gone out,

and she gazed at the black, cold hearth, and then round the ugly little room, with a momentary wonder as to where she was. Then recollection returned to her, and she sighed. The sigh was followed by a quick frown. The thought of the great injustice her uncle had done her rankled terribly, and she could not dwell on it without quivering with anger and wounded pride. He to believe her guilty of theft and falsehood! It was incredible, or rather would have been incredible had she not had the evidence of her own ears to go upon. Nothing less would have convinced her that her uncle believed her capable of such astounding conduct; and on the other hand, Ethel told herself passionately, nothing but her own assertion that she had done those things should have made him believe that she had. Under the circumstances she had done the right thing in leaving his house.

Half an hour later Kate, coming into the room, found her new lodger gazing into the fireless grate with a defiant expression on her face.

"Oh, I am sorry, miss," she said, coming forward hastily. "I have been in once before, but you were so sound asleep that I did not like to disturb you. I will soon get the fire up again. And what would you like to eat, please, miss? Shall I order in anything?"

Anxiety to please her new lodger, without quite knowing how to set about it, had kept poor Kate on tenterhooks all the morning. The young lady looked, as Kate mentally expressed it, as though she were accustomed to the best of everything, and yet she calmly fell off to sleep without

giving a single order about lunch or dinner, or what groceries to get in, or anything. It was trying conduct to a landlady. To order in things on her own initiative she did not dare; for the young lady might not be pleased, and might even refuse to pay for them, and that would be a terrible way of running the house in her mother's absence. And the good that three people—Mr. Pat Murphy, his little niece Kate, and Mrs. Dennis Murphy herself—hoped would result from the fortnight's change she was giving herself in the country would be altogether discounted if, on her return home, she found that Kate had been getting into debt.

Therefore when Kate knocked timidly and entered the room, it was not to lay the table for lunch, but to ask what the lady would be pleased to order for that meal.

"Oh, anything; I don't mind. Anything that's going, you know," Ethel said vaguely. "I'm not at all particular."

The only food that was at present going in the house was Kate's own meal of cold potatoes; and though the young lady might be, as she said, not particular, she would not be likely to fancy a lunch that took that form.

"If you would name something, miss," she said, "I would run out and fetch it. You ate scarcely any breakfast, and you must be feeling faint for want of food. If you will excuse my mentioning it, miss, you look dreadfully pale."

Ethel rose and gravely surveyed herself in the glass over the mantelpiece. Few things annoyed her more than

to have her looks commented upon; and to be told that she looked pale, as though she were a girl that went in for headaches and ailments of that sort, was absolutely displeasing to her. Yet there was no gainsaying that Kate was right. Her face was very white, and there were big black circles round her eyes. She was also obliged to recognize the fact that she was feeling far from well. The mere act of standing up made her turn giddy and queer for a moment, and she was quite glad to sit down again.

"It was silly of me not to eat any breakfast," she said. "I shall be all right as soon as I have eaten something."

"Then what shall I get you, miss?" Kate asked again. "Let me see," she went on briskly, delighted at this opportunity of showing her new lodger that she was a landlady with a head on her shoulders, "there will be lunch now, and dinner to-night, and something for your breakfast to-morrow. And what vegetables would you like to-night? And what sort of pudding? I might get half a pound of suet from the butcher's while I am about it. Or if you like a fruit tart better, I might get some apples."

Ethel's head began to reel. She did not want to appear ungrateful, but she really did not feel equal to taking the interest that her young landlady evidently expected of her in this vista of future meals.

She took her purse from her pocket and extracted a couple of sovereigns. "Look here," she said, "if you will do all the thinking about the meals and the ordering, I should like it much better. I really don't mind what I eat."

A little frightened at the responsibility that had been thrust upon her, but determined to do her best to prove herself worthy of it, Kate withdrew.

She pictured her mother's delight when she heard that, all through Uncle Pat's kindness, they had secured such a good lodger, and went upon her marketing errand in a very happy and contented frame of mind.

Ethel made a valiant attempt to eat the nicely-cooked mutton chop which, with a milk rice pudding, made its appearance somewhere about two o'clock, but she could not swallow more than a few mouthfuls of either.

"I shall be all right when I have had a night's rest," she said to herself, as, glad to escape even from the sight of food, she rose from the table and walked to the window. What a dreary outlook it was! The fog had lifted itself since the morning to about the height of the houses on the opposite side of the road, and now hung there like a yellowish-gray pall. It was beginning to rain too, and Ethel stood and watched the drops as they fell on the pavement, becoming gradually merged into one sheet of water.

Pemberton Road was a quiet road. Few people passed up or down, but the end of it ran into a bustling thoroughfare, with shops on either side, where a constant stream of cabs and omnibuses went to and fro. Ethel could just catch a glimpse of that road and of the hurrying crowd that thronged it; but after a few minutes it began to rain faster, and the road at the end of the street was blotted out by the falling curtain.

Then Ethel turned away and went back to the fireside and the armchair of stamped velvet. She had taken an almost active dislike to that chair because the velvet clung to her dress each time she moved, but as it was the only chair in the room which could by any stretch of imagination be termed comfortable, she was forced to occupy it.

She sat down, and presently found herself wondering what she would have been doing had she been at home. Driving with her uncle perhaps, or riding or playing golf or badminton, or engaged in any one of the occupations in which she took such delight and which made up the sum of her happy, idly busy life. It was curious to think how completely she was cut off from that old life now. Would her uncle miss her? she wondered. She gave a sudden hard little laugh that, ringing out in the silence of the room, startled her. Had he not said that he could never trust her again? It was not likely, then, that he would miss her. Why, he would be glad that she had gone away. She had done the only thing possible under the circumstances. She was not so sure though, now that she came to review her conduct calmly, that she had done it in the best possible way. She had gone off rather as though she were running away like a rebellious school-girl; and of course that was not the light in which her behaviour must be regarded. Her departure might not have been altogether dignified, but she did not wish there should be anything surreptitious or clandestine about it. Sir Laurence was entirely welcome to know where she was and

what she intended to do. No sooner, however, had she said that to herself than it occurred to her that he could not possibly know unless she told him. No doubt he supposed her to be in Barnstown at that moment; but in a day or two Ida would write to ask why she had not turned up there, and a letter addressed to Nutcombe Hall in Ida's handwriting, when she, Ethel, was believed to be with her, would naturally excite wonder and remark on Sir Laurence's part. He would telegraph immediately; Ida would wire back, and then a hue-and-cry would be raised. The mere thought of such a sensational outcome to the step she had taken annoyed Ethel. It would be too foolish to allow any mystery to exist as to her whereabouts or her plans. She would write that moment and acquaint her uncle with both.

As she got out her writing-case she half paused in momentary doubt as to whether she should telegraph. But, no, a letter would meet all the requirements of the case. Ida would wait a day or two before writing to know why she had not turned up. She had said Tuesday or Wednesday; and as she had not come on the Tuesday, Ida would have concluded that the problematical hockey match had been arranged for the Wednesday, and had detained her at home. As she took up her pen and wrote her address, "No. 33 Pemberton Road," on the top of the page, all the furious anger she had felt for her uncle yesterday burnt up again in her, and her hand trembled so that she could scarcely hold her pen. Her anger, however, found no vent in passionate reproaches;

it showed itself only in extreme coldness and stiffness. Had Sir Laurence been destined ever to receive that letter, which he was not, he must have smiled at it first, however grave it might make him afterwards, for its tone of haughty formality was really rather comical.

Instead of "My darling Uncle Laurie," she began "Dear Uncle Laurence," and plunging abruptly into what she wanted to say, informed him that after what had passed, it was of course impossible for her to live with him any longer. In fact, if after all the years he had known her, he could believe what he had believed of her, it was much better that she should live somewhere else. She was not going to say a word in her own justification; the matter, for all she cared, might rest there. Henceforward she intended to earn her own living, and support herself entirely until she came of age. The letter ended as suddenly as it began. She simply signed her name without any of the usual concluding messages of affection.

She put on her things, intending to post it herself, but before she had gone further than the doorstep she changed her mind. It was a wretched evening, and perhaps for the first time in her life Ethel felt reluctant to face inclement weather.

She signalled to a ragged, dirty little urchin who, with a bundle of newspapers under his arm, was running up the street shouting, "Litest edishun. Furth'orrible detiles. 'Ere you are, miss! Speshul edishun. All about the dreadful fire."

"I don't want a paper," Ethel said, pushing away the one he would have thrust into her hand. "I want you to post this letter for me. And here's twopence for doing it."

The boy's eyes glistened as he grabbed the twopence and the letter. He saw a way of making not twopence but threepence out of the transaction, but his obsequious, "Thank you, lidy. I'll post it in the pillar-box in the next street, lidy," gave Ethel no clue to his thoughts. Glad to have been spared the walk in the cold rain, she went back to the sitting-room; while the boy, having first betaken himself out of sight of the house, carefully tore the stamp off the corner of the envelope, put it with the now dishonestly earned twopence into his pocket, and tore the letter into bits and scattered them in the gutter. Then, his mind full of schemes for converting the stamp into a penny in the near future, he broke into a run, shouting as he went, "'Orrible fire in Devonshire! Theatre burned to the ground! Litest detiles."

Ethel went to bed early that night. There was nothing to be gained by sitting over her smoky little fire, and a long night's rest would fit her for the morrow's work. She had quite decided upon her plan of action. She intended to look through the lists of advertisements in the next day's paper, and take a post either as companion or governess; she did not care which.

But all her plans for the next day came to naught. When the morrow arrived it found her too ill to get up.

"It's just a headache and a queer sort of aching all over me," she managed to say to Kate, when her young landlady, fidgety at the non-appearance of her solitary lodger, came to see what had happened to her. "I shall stay in bed a bit longer. I shall be all right presently."

She drank a little milk, but refused to eat anything; and whenever Kate, who tiptoed in at frequent intervals, bent over the bedside, she seemed to be either dozing or in a state of drowsiness. Towards evening Mr. Murphy called to see his niece, and learn how she and the lodger whom he had been the means of bringing to her were getting on. But his pride and self-congratulation on that score were considerably dashed when he heard that the young lady was in bed and ill. Indeed he was so perturbed at the news, and so afraid that the illness might prove to be something infectious, that he clapped on his hat again and went for the nearest doctor.

Influenza was rife in the neighbourhood at the time, and all the doctors had their hands full; and the practitioner at whose bell Mr. Murphy, in the agitation and distress of his mind, rang so repeatedly and violently that the servant, thinking it was a case of some street accident, came running to the door, was the very busiest of them.

He was at dinner when Mr. Murphy, loudly exclaiming that it was a matter of the very greatest urgency, edged his way past the remonstrating servant, and, guided by the scent of hot dishes, fairly ran down his quarry.

Dr. Ramsey at first declared that it was out of the question that he could come round that night.

"Faith, then, I won't answer for the consequence," Mr. Murphy retorted. "No, I can't say what it is, but it is mortal bad. Not a bite nor a sup has the young lady taken these last three days, and her temperature going up and up. It may be smallpox, or it may be typhus or diphtheria. From what my purty young niece says, it seems to be a bit of all three, but it needs a rale cliver doctor to tell us exactly what it is."

Partly for the sake of getting rid of his loquacious visitor and being allowed to eat the rest of his dinner in peace, Dr. Ramsey promised to look in at No. 33 Pemberton Terrace in an hour's time, and he was as good as his word.

He looked at Ethel carefully, took her temperature, and then pronounced her to be suffering from a severe chill accompanied by high fever. Ethel, who had lain all day in a queer sort of stupor, in which, though she was half conscious of what went on around her, she did not appear to be in any way concerned with it, roused herself as the grave, clever face bent over her.

She supposed he must be a doctor, and wondered if she were ill. It really did not matter much. The curious thing was that they did not seem to know her name. As if every one did not know that it was Ethel! She half sat up in bed to tell them so, but fell back, and was conscious that her voice died away in a ridiculously weak, indistinct murmur.

After that everything was a blank for several days. Influenza had followed upon the chill, and for a few days she was not only very ill, but light-headed into the bargain. But as there had never been any fear of her taking a turn for the worse, Dr. Ramsey had not again spoken, as he had done at first, of the advisability of trying to find out her name and communicating with her friends. He had sent in a nurse during the nights in which the fever had run its highest, and Kate had done all that was required for her during the day.

"And you may think yourself lucky, young lady, to have escaped an attack of rheumatic fever," Dr. Ramsey said when she was well enough again to understand what was being said to her, which was not until the evening of the third day after she had been taken ill. "I hear you travelled up from the country in wet clothes. Enough to have killed you, and would have done so were you not the lucky possessor of an exceptionally fine constitution. Don't play tricks with it again."

That was the last time she saw the kindly, overworked doctor. Shortly afterwards he too fell a victim to the scourge of influenza, and by the time he was well again Ethel had left No. 33 Pemberton Terrace.

Meanwhile she was to make the discovery that, annoying though it was to fall ill unexpectedly, the getting well again was also a tedious, disagreeable process. And though the magnificent constitution of which the doctor had spoken so highly stood her in good stead and helped her to get well in a marvellously short time, all things

considered, the protracted confinement tried her patience sorely. Weakness, too, had brought her pride low, and she found herself looking and longing for a letter from her uncle in a way she would not have deemed possible one short week ago.

Almost the first question she asked on regaining consciousness was whether there were any letters for her; and when Kate answered her in the negative, she could scarcely believe that she had heard aright. But when day after day passed bringing no letter from her uncle, her surprise deepened into something very like dismay.

Had she by her abrupt departure from home offended and displeased him beyond hope of forgiveness? During the long days on which she lay, at first in bed, and then on a sofa in the ugly, dark little sitting-room which she had come to detest so heartily, she had ample time for reflection; and, having nothing else to do, she did a good deal of thinking. And so she came to see that the conduct which she had thought justifiable and right was deserving only, after all, of nothing but blame. What if her uncle had believed her capable of going to his desk and taking his money? Such a kind, just man as he was, slow to think evil of any one, must have had overwhelming evidence before he allowed himself to be convinced of her guilt. And surely it would have been better if, instead of flinging out of the house in a white heat of passion, she had gone into the study and explained exactly how she had obtained the money. Now, in her calmer, softened mood, it seemed the most

obvious and natural thing to have done. A sense of what was due to her uncle showed her that she had owed him that much at least. But unfortunately she had only thought of what was owing to her own dignity; and to a sorry pass that same dignity had led her. Then on the top of it she had written him that absurd letter. No wonder her uncle had not answered it! It really had not deserved an answer. Tears sprang to Ethel's eyes as she thought of the poor way in which she had requited all the unvarying kindness and gentleness he had shown her all her life. What was a few minutes' doubt of her, unfounded though it was, to weigh in the balance against all those years of loving care? And yet, because he had mistrusted her, she had been willing to leave him for ever. The ingratitude and silliness of her behaviour overwhelmed her with shame, and she could not rest until she had once more written to her uncle—a penitent, humble letter this time—saying how sorry she was now for going away in that foolish manner, and explaining that she had got the seventy pounds she had given Mr. Sparrow by selling, or rather pledging, her diamond star to the jeweller. "If you do not believe me, ask him, and he will tell you that I am speaking the truth," she added.

Ethel had never been backward in owning herself in the wrong when it had been pretty conclusively proved to her first that she was indeed wrong; and it was the frank, handsome way in which she made amends that had, as much as any of her other qualities, caused her to be so popular and admired among her schoolfellows. Any girl

whom her careless speech had in any way offended or hurt felt her resentment instantly die away and give place to something very like shame of herself for having made a fuss when Ethel apologized. She did not spare herself now.

"I feel more ashamed of myself than I can say for treating you so, Uncle Laurie," she wrote, "and it will serve me right if you say you can't forgive me. But don't trouble to say it. If you think I have behaved so badly that you don't want me home again, don't write, and I shall know that you are not going to forgive me."

"And if he doesn't forgive me," she thought as she stamped and addressed the envelope, "I shall go out to that lady in New Zealand who is advertising for a governess. But he will forgive me. When has Uncle Laurie ever been angry with me for long? And oh, how good it will be to go home again, and leave these horrid little poky dull rooms!" What fun, entirely through her own folly, she had missed during the last fortnight—the week at Barnstown with Ida, the rides and drives with her uncle; everything, in fact, that made up the sum of her happy, outdoor life. But worse than all, how her heartless disregard for his feelings must have hurt her uncle! He must have been cut to the quick by her conduct, otherwise he would surely have answered her first letter, absurd and impertinent though its tone had been.

She went out and posted the letter herself, and as she slipped it into the pillar-box her heart grew light at the thought that it was safely started on its long journey

westward. Sir Laurence would get it the next morning, and Ethel could imagine the pleasure with which he would receive it. He would sit down at once and write her a long letter full of forgiveness and love. Perhaps he would telegraph; perhaps even, and Ethel's heart gave a jump at the thought, he would start off to town himself to fetch her home. That would be the best of all; and knowing him as she did, Ethel felt sure that it would be the most likely course for him to pursue. If he caught the morning express he would be with her in time to bring her home by the evening one.

She went back to 33 Pemberton Terrace in a happier frame of mind than she had known since she had overheard her uncle's speech to Violet, did a little packing, and going early to bed, slept the whole night through. She awoke feeling so strong and well that Kate, coming in with her hot water, expressed her pleasure at seeing her look so much better.

"Are you thinking of going away, miss?" she added, her glance falling with some surprise on Ethel's open trunk, which, though it could scarcely in any sense of the word be called packed, was more than half full of her clothes. Kate had been very kind and attentive to Ethel during her illness—as kind and attentive, that is to say, as she could well be, considering that she had all the housework and cooking to do. Luckily, Ethel had not, after the first day or two, needed much care or attention; and as she had been able to pay for everything the doctor ordered, Kate had not in any way been a loser by her lodger's illness. But the

doctor's bill, which had included the fee for the services of the nurse, the medicine, and various sickroom dainties, had all made a considerable inroad upon her twenty pounds, and she calculated that, after paying the rent of the rooms, there would not be very much left.

"Yes, I may be going away to-day," Ethel said, radiant with the delightful thought that she would probably see her uncle again before she was very many hours older.

"You have found a situation, then, miss?" Kate pursued, not out of mere curiosity, but out of her genuine interest in the future of her young lodger.

Ethel had not told her very much about herself, but she had said that she had come up to London to look for a situation as governess or companion to an elderly lady, and Kate, whose ignorance of the difficulties that might attend such a quest was about on a par with Ethel's own, thought that she would merely have to apply for a post of the sort to get it immediately.

"No, I have not found a new one," Ethel answered, with a laugh. It was the first time that Kate had heard her laugh. "I am going back to my old one, to the uncle with whom I have lived all my life."

"Well, miss," said Kate simply, "it isn't for me to express an opinion, but I should say you couldn't do better. There aren't many uncles who would give their nieces all the pretty things you have. You might have got more wages with a stranger perhaps, but, after all, money does not make up for being with one's own relations."

Ethel could not help smiling at the misconception which Kate had formed of the place she had taken in her uncle's house. Evidently Kate believed that she was a sort of paid companion there. And no doubt if Kate had realized in what very pleasant lines Ethel's lot was cast, she would have been still more astonished than she already was that Ethel should have been willing to leave such an uncle.

Ethel had calculated that she might get a telegram from Sir Laurence at any time between ten and eleven, and as soon as she had finished breakfast she stationed herself at the window to watch for the appearance of a telegraph boy. But though she remained there till nearly twelve, not one came in sight during all that time.

She was disappointed, but not greatly disturbed. On the receipt of her letter that morning Sir Laurence must have left for town in such a hurry that he had had literally no time to wire. After all, there would not be much use in telegraphing when he knew that she would take it for granted that he was coming to her as soon as he could. Though he could not at the very earliest be with her before three, she did not go out, but spent the time in finishing her packing and roaming restlessly from one room to the other.

Kate, who had gathered that she was on the lookout for her uncle, was almost as eagerly expectant of his arrival as Ethel herself, and the street door was answered throughout the day with a most unusual promptitude. But the afternoon wore into evening, and the evening into night, and there was neither sign nor word from Sir Laurence.

"He is writing," said Ethel, when, as twelve was striking from all the church clocks in the neighbourhood, Kate slipped the bolts and turned the key in the street door, "and I shall get a letter in the morning."

Kate felt that few more disagreeable tasks had ever fallen to her lot than the one she had to perform the next morning when, on going into Ethel's room, she had to answer her eager look of inquiry with the information that the post had brought no letter for her.

"But there's the second post, miss, at half-past ten; perhaps you will get one by that."

Ethel's disappointment was too great to allow her to speak, but she knew that she would get no letter by the second post. If Sir Laurence had intended to write he would not have delayed an instant in doing so. His silence meant that she was unforgiven, and that he wished to have nothing more to do with her. But presently, like a ray of hope, came the thought that he might possibly be away from home. In that case her letter would not reach him until this morning, so that there was at least as much chance of her hearing from him to-day as there had been yesterday. If he was in town he would be with her in a very little while indeed. So Ethel dressed hurriedly, and passed another day of uncertainty and suspense. Each time a hansom came rattling up the street her heart gave a throb of hope, only to sink again like lead as it drove rapidly by. And though by the evening she had quite convinced herself that she had given up all hope of either seeing him or hearing from him, it took another

two days of waiting and anxious expectation before the last lingering remnants of hope vanished from her mind, to be replaced by a settled conviction that her uncle did not intend to have anything more to do with her.

Well, in that case, she said to herself defiantly, she did not want to have anything more to do with him. Nevertheless she cried herself to sleep that night, and woke in the morning feeling more dejected and forlorn than she had ever imagined it possible for any one to feel. But she knew that she had no time to give way to despairing thoughts. She had her livelihood to earn, and it had become a matter of pressing necessity that she should set about earning it immediately. Her little stock of money would soon be running exceedingly low, and after the scornful silence with which he had received her two letters, Ethel felt she would sooner have starved than have applied to her uncle for help.

But before Kate she put a brave face on her disappointment; and Kate was so far deceived by it that she believed the young lady was not averse, after all, to seeking a new situation. Ethel had now been just over two weeks in London, and it was not altogether surprising, considering the dreary way in which they had been spent, that they should have seemed more like two years. She had arrived early on a Wednesday morning; this was Friday. She could keep her rooms until the following Wednesday, therefore, without incurring extra expense, and by that time surely she would have found a suitable situation. A search through the advertisement columns of the *Morning Post* told her

that several ladies were in want of governesses, and two or three of companions. It would be strange if she did not secure one of these posts. Some were to be applied for by letter only, but candidates for the others were to call personally at stated hours; and having written to the ones that came under the former category, Ethel took down the addresses of the latter on a piece of paper, and started off on her quest. But though she called at about half a dozen houses, it was only to learn at each that the post had already been filled; and with her confidence in being able to secure work merely for the asking considerably shaken, Ethel returned to her rooms, and was scarcely surprised when the next day's post brought her no answer to the letters she had written.

Kate advised her to try a governess agency, and Ethel thought the advice good. So taking down the address of one advertised in the *Morning Post*, she went straight off to Victoria Street to interview the lady who kept it. She was a doctor's widow, a Mrs. Rogers, and not only was she a thorough lady, but she was possessed of plenty of shrewd common sense and business abilities. Before Ethel had been many minutes in the room Mrs. Rogers had summed her up with wonderful accuracy.

"This girl was never brought up to earn her own living," so ran her thoughts; "and there is no need for her to do so now, though she thinks that there is. Has probably left home in a temper."

Ethel stated that she wished for a post as companion, governess, secretary, or housekeeper. She would be

satisfied with a salary of one hundred pounds a year. She did not really mind whether it was in London or the country, but for choice she would like Scotland or Ireland, or even the Continent. She had once heard that governesses in Russia got a very good time—plenty of skating and sleighing in the winter, and a country life in the summer. Yes, the idea had come to her since entering the office, and she would not at all mind accepting a post as governess in the family of some Russian noble.

Mrs. Rogers listened attentively. Somehow people always did listen when Ethel spoke. She talked with so much animation and vivacity, and seemed to take it so entirely for granted that what she said was interesting to her hearers, that her audience rarely interrupted her. And now although Mrs. Rogers was a busy woman, she let Ethel run on until she had run down, and then she began to ask a few questions. What experience did she possess? What were her qualifications? And, lastly, what references had she?

“References?” said Ethel immediately. “None; none at all. People must just accept me as I am. I shan’t refer them to any one for my character, or anything of that sort.”

Mrs. Rogers could scarcely help smiling. There was a sort of defiant “you may take me or leave me” air about Ethel that she found rather diverting, especially as Ethel seemed quite satisfied that she would be taken. But her amusement was of short duration, and she set to work to

explain seriously to Ethel that no one would dream of taking her unless she could produce satisfactory references.

"As this is your first situation," she said—Ethel had been obliged to disclaim any previous experience—"you must at least state with whom you have been living, who your parents are, where you were educated, and so on."

"I don't see what business that would be of any one's," Ethel exclaimed, "as long as I taught their children well, or read aloud to them nicely, or did what I was paid to do. Of course I could give references if I chose, but I don't choose. I don't want anybody to know who I am, and I don't want my own people to know where I am. Most probably I shouldn't even use my own name; but, of course, I should tell them that I had assumed one."

"My dear young lady," Mrs. Rogers said, laughing outright, "you will never get a place on these terms—never, never. Now take my advice. Be a sensible girl. Make up the quarrel, and go home again."

Ethel stared at her in amazement. Was Mrs. Rogers a witch, or was Sir Laurence in communication with her?

"Neither the one nor the other," Mrs. Rogers said, laughing again, and reading Ethel's thoughts with as much ease as though she had spoken them aloud. "I use my eyes and my intelligence, that is all; and I am convinced that I have hit the right nail on the head in saying that you have run away from home, haven't I now?"

"Not run away," Ethel said with dignity. "I left

home certainly, because of a misunderstanding, and I shall never go back there again."

"Don't say that, my dear girl," Mrs. Rogers said earnestly. "Life is too short for quarrels and misunderstandings. It is easy to see that you have a hasty, proud temper. Don't let it get the better of you. It will be a poor consolation afterwards to remember that you pained the people who loved you for the sake of ministering to your pride. You say your people don't know where you are. Is it kind to keep them in suspense about you? Don't be offended at my speaking to you like this. You came to me to get a place, and instead I have given you advice. An unpardonable liberty in a stranger, you will think."

She ended with a frank, charming smile that would have won her pardon from any one more churlishly inclined than Ethel.

"I am not offended," Ethel said quickly. "But you are wrong in thinking that mine is a quarrel that can be made up. I have tried to," she added, "but my letter has never been answered."

"Perhaps it never got posted," said Mrs. Rogers, who was becoming more and more interested in Ethel every moment. "Letters have a way of getting lost sometimes."

"I posted it myself," Ethel answered, with a wistfulness and a little suppressed sigh that did not escape Mrs. Rogers's quick ears, and made her sympathize keenly with the heartache that probably underlay it. "And I had written before too, so he, my uncle, knows my address quite well."

"And this misunderstanding, was it very serious?"

"Very," was Ethel's sombre reply. "He thought I had stolen money from him, and told a lie about it. He had known me all my life, and might have known I was not like that. So I left home at once. Then I wrote when I got to London, and just told him where I was, so that he might not be anxious. It was not a nice letter, but I was angry. Then I got ill, and while I was ill I missed him so, and remembered how kind he had always been to me, and how I had always loved him. So I wrote again, telling him how sorry I was for having flown into a rage, and that I wanted to come home again if he would forgive me. I told him, too, how I had got the money that he thought I had stolen; and that was the hardest of all, for I hate defending myself."

"And—" said Mrs. Rogers, as Ethel paused.

"That's all," said Ethel, with another little sigh. "He never answered the letter, and that meant that he could not forgive me, and never wanted to see me again. I said if he didn't write, I was to understand that that was what he meant."

"It's the sheerest nonsense," Mrs. Rogers cried. "Excuse me, my dear," as she met Ethel's astonished gaze, "but I repeat, it is the sheerest nonsense to suppose that any uncle, who loved his niece as you say your uncle loved you, should turn her adrift at a moment's notice to earn her own living. You may depend upon it that he has never got either of your letters. My dear, believe me, you are making yourself and him too unhappy about

nothing. Write again, or, better still, go home and see him."

Ethel's head went up an inch or two. "I shall never write to him again," she said, with a finality that proved her mind was quite made up on that point. "I know he got both my letters. He must have got them. No, I heard him say he could never trust me again, and so I might have spared myself the trouble of writing at all."

"But you must write to him again," Mrs. Rogers said, her interest in Ethel deepening into something very like anxiety on her account. "You cannot face the world alone; you are far too young and inexperienced. By the way," she added, drawing a sheet of paper towards her and taking up a pencil, "you have not given me your name or your address—your old home address, I mean. Of course it is just possible that a lady may be willing to employ you without knowing more about you than you choose to tell."

"Then in that case she will not want to be told my real name or my old address," Ethel said, smiling a little at the ruse Mrs. Rogers had employed. "It is my turn to do a little thought-reading, and I know you want to write to my uncle, and try to make it up for me. Why, I would not have you do that for worlds. I would not have told you anything if you had known my name. It's quite different talking to a stranger, and you have been very kind. But I must go now. I feel afraid that if I stayed, you would somehow guess my name, and write and beg my uncle to forgive me. And I could

not bear that." Her face changed and hardened, and she threw back her head with a little defiant gesture. "It is I who cannot forgive now."

She had risen as she spoke, and Mrs. Rogers rose too. "My dear, my dear," she said, laying one hand on Ethel's arm, "there is enough unavoidable sorrow and loneliness in the world without our going out of the way to create fresh. And this trouble of yours seems to be very much of your own making."

"No!" Ethel answered with spirit; "it is not. Do you think that I want to spend the next two years and five months teaching cross little children, or reading dull books to old ladies in stuffy rooms? I had a perfectly splendid time at home with Uncle Laurence, but that is all over now. It wasn't easy to ask to be forgiven once; it would be just impossible to ask twice, or, worse still, have some one else ask for you."

"But putting the question of forgiveness aside," Mrs. Rogers said, "you must allow any one who wishes to engage you to refer to your uncle. Otherwise you will never get a situation."

"Then I will scrub floors," Ethel answered, laughing. "That is to say, if people will trust me with the soap. Oh, I shall earn my living somehow, never fear."

Chapter XII.

ETHEL BECOMES A GOVERNESS.

IN spite of her gay assertion that she would earn her living somehow, notwithstanding the difficulty about references, Ethel made her way back to Pemberton Terrace in rather a perturbed frame of mind.

Her chances of obtaining speedy employment seemed to be exceedingly small; and she gave an impatient sigh as she reflected that it was her attack of influenza, short time though it had lasted, which had been responsible for the waste of so much time and money. A bitterly cold east wind was blowing, and it swept down Pemberton Terrace in violent, intermittent gusts, driving clouds of dust before it, and searching out bits of straw and odd scraps of paper from the untidy areas. Ethel, who had to wait a moment or two on the doorstep, shivered as she glanced up and down the long, dreary street. It seemed to her that she had never before fully realized what ugly places there were in the world, or sufficiently pitied the people who had to live in them. How could Kate, for instance, be content to live there year after year? Yet she was not only content, but took an actual pride in keeping the house as neat

and as clean as constant rubbing and dusting and scrubbing could make it. In fact, her whole life seemed to be one endless round of sweeping and dusting and scrubbing, with cooking and marketing and washing-up thrown in as her only variations. She had absolutely no pleasures, or none that Ethel could consider such; yet she never appeared dissatisfied with her dull life, but was apparently content to work from morning to night. How nice it would be when she came in for her money to be able to send Kate a present of a few hundred pounds! The thought of the surprise and pleasure that would be Kate's when she received such an unexpected present made Ethel momentarily oblivious of the fact that she was being kept longer than was pleasant on the draughty doorstep; and before she had time to recollect it and ring again, she heard Kate come flying down the staircase and run along towards the door.

"I am so sorry to have kept you waiting, miss," she began—the beaming expression on her face, however, and the happy ring in her voice gave emphatic denial to the fact that she was at the moment sorry about anything—"but—"

"You needn't tell me any more," Ethel said, her eyes falling on a leather bonnet-box and a bundle of rugs that blocked the narrow passage. "Some new people have come."

"It's Mrs. Jones," Kate said excitedly, as she shut the street door, and followed Ethel into the sitting-room. "Have I never told you about Mrs. Jones, Miss Dunn?"

Why, she is just the kindest lady that ever was, and the friend she has been to mother I couldn't tell you. Mother was nurse to her baby—oh, years ago, miss—and since mother set up here, Mrs. Jones has always been that good to her; sending people and coming herself to stay when times were slack, and always insisting on paying the week, even when she only stopped a night. She is only going to stay a night or two now, and yet I know she will pay for the week. She has come up to London to engage a governess for her two little grand-daughters."

As Ethel had told Mrs. Rogers, she did not mean to take any situation under her own name, and accident more than design had led to her adopting the one by which Kate had just addressed her. When her young landlady had been making out her first bill, she had felt the awkwardness of not knowing her lodger's name, and had timidly asked for it.

"Dun—" began Ethel, and stopped short to consider whether or not she would give her real name.

"Thank you, miss," Kate had replied; and as Miss Dunn she had henceforth known her. And as none of her things were marked otherwise than with a monogram, the name did very well.

Full of excitement at the unexpected arrival of her new lodger, Kate bustled away to get tea for her, promising at the same time to bring Ethel some also. It was not long before Ethel heard her mounting the stairs tea-tray in hand; and judging from the way in which Kate

raised her voice when she spoke to the lady overhead, Ethel concluded that Mrs. Jones was slightly deaf. Presently, against her will, but rather to her amusement, she found herself listening to one side of the conversation that ensued.

"Only one, ma'am; a young lady. Oh yes, ma'am, a real lady and no mistake. She is looking for a place as governess or companion. Miss Dunn—Dunn. D-u-n-n I think is the way it is spelt, ma'am. About eighteen or nineteen. No, I don't think she has found one yet, ma'am. Why, yes, ma'am, I should think it would be the very place she would like. Just two little children, and to go driving with you."

A prolonged silence followed. Evidently Mrs. Jones was thinking over the idea that had just presented itself to her; and Kate, if her hurried footsteps were any guide, was setting the tea-table as quickly as possible, in order that she might fly down to Ethel, and impart the good news that Mrs. Jones was seriously considering the advisability of engaging her as a sort of governess companion.

And Ethel knew that much beforehand, and felt that it was good news. But on one point she was determined. Come what might, she would not refer Mrs. Jones to Sir Laurence. Unless that lady were willing to take her without knowing anything whatever about her, she need not take her at all.

Kate, delighted to be the means of giving both her drawing- and dining-room lodgers what they respectively

wanted, ran with willing feet up and down the stairs on the preliminary messages.

"No," she went back to report to Mrs. Jones, "Miss Dunn had not yet found a situation."

"Would Miss Dunn then step upstairs and see Mrs. Jones? Mrs. Jones would come down herself, but she was tired after her journey, and she was sure Miss Dunn would excuse an old lady sending for her in that manner."

Ethel would have swallowed her pride and obeyed the behest even if the summons had been a curt and peremptory one; but the polite way in which it was worded prepossessed her in Mrs. Jones's favour, and it was with a distinct hope in her mind that Mrs. Jones would engage her that she walked into the drawing-room.

Kate, having performed her part, discreetly withdrew, leaving them together. Although Mrs. Jones's hair was white, and although she rose from her chair with a little difficulty, she was by no means the old woman she had called herself. Rheumatism and an inclination to stoutness rendered her movements slow, but her fresh complexion and bright dark eyes proved her to be scarcely over fifty. She was dressed rather richly, but quietly, in black, and she had all the appearance of being a kindly, homely, unpretentious woman who enjoyed good health and ample means.

"Thank you for coming up, my dear," were her first words. "Those stairs try my rheumatic joints dreadfully, whereas I know that young folk think nothing of them."

"Oh, I did not mind coming up at all," Ethel hastened

to assure her, as, after shaking Mrs. Jones's outstretched hand, she sat down, in obedience to a gesture, close beside her.

"Eh, what did you say? I don't hear very well. Well, well! Now let me take a good look at you. My eyes are as good as ever, thank goodness, and they make up to me for the loss of my hearing in a way that astonishes most people. You won't mind if I take a good look at you?"

Ethel shook her head slightly, to imply that she would not mind in the least, and for the space of a long, silent minute Mrs. Jones studied her face intently.

"She'll do," she said at last. "Frank, honest, straightforward, pretty strong will, high spirited, quick tempered. Well, well, none of us are perfect."

The corners of Ethel's mouth quivered and broke into a smile, and the expression of Mrs. Jones's face became one of apology.

"I was thinking aloud again, I suppose," she said. "I can't hear myself, but I suppose others can. I get into sad hot water sometimes. Well, well, I am too old to change my ways. But I like the look of you, my dear, as you must have heard me say; and if you are willing to come to me as governess to my two grandchildren, I shall be very glad to have you. Your salary will be one hundred pounds a year, and you will be treated as one of the family, if that is any inducement, the family consisting only of the two children and myself. My husband is away in Russia on a mining expedition, and

is likely to be away for another six months. We live quite in the country, and lead a very quiet life indeed. I feel I must tell you this beforehand, so that you may not be disappointed afterwards."

Perhaps it was her placid, easy-going nature, coupled with her deafness, that disinclined Mrs. Jones to put Ethel through an exhaustive series of questions as to her capabilities, references, and so on, the answers to which she could only have heard with difficulty—she disliked an ear-trumpet and never used one; or perhaps Ethel's prepossessing appearance finished what Kate's warm praises had begun, and made Mrs. Jones decide that Ethel was the very person of whom she was in search. At any rate she did not ask to be referred to any one who had known Ethel previous to her arrival in London.

"Now about what I want you to teach my grandchildren," she pursued as soon as she was satisfied that a quiet country life held no terrors for Ethel. "This is a very important point. Miss Jenner, their former governess, was very ladylike and refined—all that I suppose an ordinary governess should be—but she could not teach the children what I wanted them taught, simply because she had not got it in her."

At this point Ethel, who had regarded her appointment as secure, began to feel uneasy. What was this qualification which she must possess? A knowledge of music? If so, the post would never be hers, she was afraid.

"And children," pursued Mrs. Jones, little guessing what tenterhooks Ethel was on, "soon find out the truth,

And for all they are so quiet, no children were ever sharper than Nina and Doris."

Little wretches! Ethel reflected. Would they silently sum up her deficiencies, and find her wanting also in this all-important qualification?

"So that," continued Mrs. Jones, who, once she was fairly embarked on a subject, spoke in a slow, deliberate way, as if she were carefully weighing each word—"so that when they came to me one day and told me that Miss Jenner was afraid of cows, I knew she was not the person I had taken her to be, and I was greatly relieved when, at the end of a fortnight, she told me that she found a town life suited her better than a country one could ever do."

For a moment Ethel wondered wildly if she would be required to teach Nina and Doris to milk cows. At any rate it would not be fear of those animals that would deter her from attending to that part of their education.

"Now, a lady who was frightened at walking through a field where a dozen cows were quietly grazing was not fitted to be the constant companion of my two little girls. They are quiet, obedient, prim little things, who never shout or run about, and who would rather sit and nurse dolls than play outdoor games, and who prefer walking soberly along the highroad to scampering across fields or through woods."

In that case, Ethel thought, Miss Jenner ought to have been exactly suited to them. She, Ethel, would certainly never meet with their approval.

"Now what I want," went on Mrs. Jones, laying one hand on Ethel's arm to ensure her close attention, "is a governess who will change their whole nature; who will teach them to be rowdy and noisy, to climb trees, and to run races."

Ethel's eyes began to dance with amusement.

"And to be up to all sorts of mischief; to like boys' games better than girls'; to love being out of doors; to be restless and troublesome; to be, in short, healthy, natural English children, regular little pickles like what you—unless I am very much mistaken—were at their age. Now," anxiously, "do you think you can do that?"

"I can try, of course," Ethel said, laughing outright. "But do you think you will like my work when I have finished with them?"

Mrs. Jones did not seem to hear her.

"Poor little things!" she said, sighing as she spoke. "I want them to be happy, and at present they are too good to be happy. I know that sounds all wrong; but when two little girls have been brought up to think that everything they want to do is wrong, and only the things they don't want to do are the things they ought to do, the constant effort to be good according to their lights can but make them unhappy. Well, well, I hope great things from your influence, Miss Dunn. They are my daughter's children. She is out in India with her husband, and when she sent them home two years ago, I begged, oh so hard, to have them; but my son-in-law wished them to go to his sisters, two ladies very much older than himself.

They were not fitted to have the charge of children, for they were prim, old-fashioned maids who abhorred all modern notions of bringing up young children. They were never allowed to play games, or to laugh, or talk loudly. Their only exercise was a walk once a day, and if it was wet, or even damp, they did callisthenics instead. Though their spines are quite strong, they were compelled to lie on backboards every day; and although neither of them have any ear for music, they were made to practise for an hour daily. They were taught to mend their own clothes, to do endless plain seams, and to knit and crochet. In fact, the lives of the poor little things were made a positive burden to them; but the odd thing is that, instead of rebelling against it all, they have grown so to like their daily tasks that they miss them now. What those two poor children would have been like had they lived a few more years with their aunts I really tremble to think; but one of the old ladies has become a great invalid lately, and has been ordered out of England, so the two children are to make their home with me in future, and I hope to make them very different before long. They have only been with me a fortnight, and so far, I am bound to say, they have not altered a bit. Not once—no, not once,” repeated Mrs. Jones in a discontented tone, “have I seen those children naughty, or even idle. It has quite depressed me; though it was partly Miss Jenner’s fault. She was delighted with them, and encouraged them in their ways by calling them model children. Model children indeed! Who wants model

children? Modern children is what I want them to be, and that is what you have got to teach them to be, Miss Dunn."

"I'll do my best," Ethel promised her again.

"And as for lessons," pursued Mrs. Jones, "never mind lessons. They shall have masters by-and-by, and go to classes, but for the present they are to run wild—to run wild," she repeated, as though she found pleasure in the phrase.

She paused, and a gleam of humour came into her face. "But don't think your task an easy one, Miss Dunn, until you have seen the material you have to work upon. From what I have seen of the poor little things, I think it would be a deal easier to make wild children tame than to make tame ones wild. I hope you will be happy with me, my dear; I will do my best to make you so, I am sure."

"Thank you very much," Ethel answered with a quickly repressed sigh. It was not likely, she thought, that she could be happy anywhere. "But I ought to tell you that Dunn is not my real name."

She spoke in tones so clear and distinct that they could not fail to reach Mrs. Jones's ear, and the astonishment they produced was unmistakable.

"Nor," went on Ethel, "can I give you any references or anything of that sort, you know. So perhaps, now that you know this, you will not want to engage me."

"Tell me more, my dear," Mrs. Jones said, "without mentioning names or places. You can tell me what made you run away from your friends in this fashion."

"I did not run away," Ethel explained, wondering what had led Mrs. Jones to arrive at the very same conclusion to which Mrs. Rogers had come; "I merely left home in a hurry."

And then she proceeded to tell Mrs. Jones of the misunderstanding that had arisen between her uncle and herself, and of the two letters she had written him. Mrs. Jones listened with every appearance of marked interest. She had great confidence in her own powers of discernment, and she was convinced that every word Ethel uttered was true. And that being so, she quickly made up her mind to engage her, in spite of the fact that she was not to know her governess's real name.

"My dear," she said, laying her hand on Ethel's, "you come to me as we have arranged. I know I shall not regret it. And you may call yourself by whatever name you please."

Kate was greatly pleased when she heard, as she presently did from Ethel, that matters had been satisfactorily settled between Mrs. Jones and herself, and that she was to accompany her home on the morrow.

"By the way," Ethel asked suddenly, as the idea occurred to her that she did not yet know where that home was, "where does Mrs. Jones live?"

"Oh, she has a most lovely place in Sussex," Kate answered. "Mother went down once for the day, and she told me all about it. It has woods, and parks, and acres and acres of ground round it. It is not really her own, though she has lived there for the last fifteen years

or so, for Mrs. Jones rented it furnished from the owner. It is called Aylewood Manor."

"What is it called?" Ethel asked in a quick, surprised tone.

"Aylewood Manor," Kate repeated, as she stooped to get the cruets from the little mahogany sideboard. She was laying the cloth for supper. "And the village is called Aylewood too. Do you think you have everything you want now, miss?"

"Oh yes, everything, thanks," Ethel answered, without as much as a glance at the table. "Aylewood Manor," she said softly to herself, when Kate had left the room, "my own home. Well, if this isn't the queerest thing that could have happened. To think of going there, of all places, as a governess! Shall I go? Yes; why not? Now I come to think of it, I would sooner go there than anywhere else."

Though she did not translate the thought into words, Ethel was not altogether displeased at the notion of playing the part of a princess in disguise, and visiting her own territory incognito, as it were. She would make the acquaintance of her cousins too, and be able to determine for herself what they were really like. And how surprised every one would be when Miss Dunn the governess turned out to be Miss Dunmayne the heiress. And how jolly it would be to be able to reward every one who had been nice to Miss Dunn, too.

The next morning Mrs. Jones went out shopping, arranging before she went that Ethel was to meet her at London Bridge in time to catch the 2.20.

"It is only an hour and a half's run to Aylewood," she informed her, "so we shall get home in plenty of time for tea."

Ethel found the morning rather long, for she had nothing whatever to do. Doing nothing was, however, infinitely better than wearily tramping half over London in search of situations that were always filled up before she got there; and she disposed of a couple of hours by going out and expending three pounds on a present for Kate—a present that took the form of a nice tweed coat lined with silk, and which overwhelmed Kate with delight and gratitude.

But Ethel would not hear a word of thanks. "It is nothing compared to what you have done for me ever since I came," she said, which was true enough.

Mr. Murphy drove her to London Bridge himself, and parted from her there with many flattering expressions of regret.

Though Ethel had arrived in good time, Mrs. Jones was there before her, and as soon as the luggage had been labelled and the tickets taken they got into the train. As soon as it started, Mrs. Jones composed herself for a nap, advising Ethel to take one herself. But Ethel was not sleepy, neither did she want to read, although Mrs. Jones had provided several magazines for her amusement. With her chin resting on her hand she gazed out of the window at the flying landscape. Years and years ago she had taken this self-same journey with her uncle. It was so long ago that she scarcely remembered anything at all about it, and the only incident that stood out clearly in

her mind in connection with it was the quarrel that had taken place between herself and her cousins. She wondered if they were as disagreeable, now that they were grown up, as they had been as children. It would be decidedly interesting to meet them again—there was no fear of their recognizing her—and find out if they had become nicer since. Hugh was away, of course; Cousin Edmund was dead; and so, too, was poor little Dickie. There would only be Mrs. Dunmayne and her two daughters at home. Margaret, she remembered, was dark, and had, as a child at any rate, a very fiery temper; while Joan was fair, and with a quieter manner. Ethel wondered anew if they would be friendly to her. Perhaps, though, they would consider Mrs. Jones's governess beneath their notice. It would really be rather amusing if they snubbed her systematically for two years, and then discovered that she was their cousin after all.

For two years! The thought passed carelessly enough through her brain, only to obtrude itself unpleasantly upon her notice. Was she really going to be a governess for two long years and five months? For a second she was utterly dismayed at the idea; but she quickly rallied. Was it not better, she asked herself passionately, to earn her own living than to be dependent any longer upon her uncle? Who would have thought that he could have disowned her in such a calm, inexorable manner? Certainly a month ago she for one would never have believed it possible. She would have laughed outright if any one had told her that the kind uncle who had since her child-

hood supplied the places of both father and mother to her should not only refuse to forgive her when she asked pardon for leaving his house in a temper, but should actually wash his hands of her and of her concerns from that moment.

Perhaps, in spite of her denial and explanation, he still believed that she had stolen his money, otherwise he would surely have written. Yes, that must be it. Violet had somehow contrived to fasten the blame so securely to her shoulders that nothing she could now say to the contrary would ever make him believe otherwise. Did every one else at home believe it of her—the entire household at Nutcombe, friends, all the people who had made up her little world? No doubt it was by that time pretty well noised abroad that Ethel Dunmayne had left home in disgrace, and that her name was never to be mentioned in the hearing of Sir Laurence. And gradually Violet would take her place in his affections—perhaps had already taken it—and she, Ethel, was being gradually forgotten.

Well, so be it. She had turned her back upon them all, and Torleigh should never see her again. But in spite of the resolute way in which she set her mouth, Ethel's gray eyes were full of sadness and something suspiciously like tears. Although she rigorously tried to check any yearning she might have to see her uncle again, she could not, strive as she would, prevent her thoughts from sometimes straying back to her old, happy life with him; and then, before she knew what she was about, a strange feeling, which, if it was not homesickness, was something very like

it, would seize her and hold her in thrall, until, summoning all her resolution, she would wrench her thoughts from the past and fix them steadily on the future.

One of those resolute efforts was needed now; and to get rid of that aching, gnawing pain, and to keep all longing to see her uncle again at bay, she bent her energies towards an endeavour to recall Aylewood Manor to her mind. But she found that it had left but a hazy impression on her memory. At the time of her brief visit to it her childish thoughts must have been too full of the recent quarrel with her cousins to have room for anything else. She succeeded, however, in giving a fresh turn to her thoughts; and when, a little later, Mrs. Jones awoke, and after a glance at her watch remarked that they must be nearly there, Ethel felt conscious of quite a thrill of excitement.

The 2.20 only stopped at Aylewood if required to do so, for it was a small country station of no particular importance. If the station, however, was beneath the notice of the express trains, it was abundantly evident, by the demeanour of the stationmaster and his solitary satellite, that Mrs. Jones was a person of considerable importance in their eyes. While the former, aided by one guard, assisted her and Ethel and sundry hand packages out of the carriage, the porter, seconded by the other guard, got their luggage out of the van.

A tall footman in a dazzling livery of crimson and gold, with an immense cockade in his hat, was in waiting; and glancing over the low paling that separated the

station from the road, Ethel saw two carriages standing. One was a smart victoria of the newest shape, with gleaming harness and finely matched gray horses, and an enormous crimson and gold monogram on its panels. The other was an equally smart omnibus, bearing the same monogram. Ethel looked at the horses and the carriages with a great deal of interest. Sir Laurence would have admired the perfect match of the two pairs. But the liveries! they were so gaudy that they almost made her blink.

"Ah, you are admiring my liveries," said Mrs. Jones's voice in low tones in her ear. "Aren't they magnificent? I chose them myself. So uncommon, I say. Some people about here dislike them, because they say I am copying royalty; but as every one knows, or ought to know, the King has scarlet liveries, not this lovely shade of rose-red. Don't you think"—complacently—"they are quite the finest you have ever seen?"

Ethel's reply was lost in the shriek of the departing train, and in the bustle attendant upon the move towards the carriage that followed she was saved from the necessity of making another. Outside the station the gorgeous coachman saluted his mistress respectfully, Mrs. Jones and Ethel took their places, the footman sprang up on to the box, a group of children looked admiringly at the horses, the stationmaster touched his cap, the porter touched his, and the carriage, balanced on springs and rubber tyres, swung down the country roads, which were bordered by brown hedgerows and tall, bare elm trees.

Ethel had often pictured her home-coming to Aylewood Manor, and the picture had presented images not unlike all these to her mind ; but in none of them had Mrs. Jones, or any one at all like her, figured. However, it did not matter. Mrs. Jones might be her employer at present, but, though she little suspected it, she was her tenant also.

Ethel had plenty of time both for thought and observation as the carriage rolled swiftly and easily along the broad country road ; for conversation in the ordinary sense Mrs. Jones rarely or never attempted. Unless she had something to say she was silent, and when she spoke it was usually to make some statement to which no answer was required.

Now and again she pointed out some object or landmark that she thought deserving of notice to a stranger. The scenery, though it did not look its best in the fading light of a February afternoon, was by no means devoid of interest, especially to Ethel, who contemplated it all in the light of the setting to her future home. It was for the most part broken, hilly country, diversified by woods and beautiful grounds belonging to one or two great country seats. Far away on the horizon lay a long ridge of high downs, while to the right stretched an expanse of flat marsh-land.

"The sea is over there," commented Mrs. Jones, following the direction of Ethel's glance, "twenty miles or so away. In the summer you must take Nina and Doris over there and let them bathe with you. I should like them to have swimming lessons."

Presently the hedgerows and fields gave place to a straggling row of cottages on one side of the road, while the other was bordered by a high hedge of rhododendrons, behind which rose a thick wood of tall Scotch firs.

"The woods are part of the Aylewood property," remarked Mrs. Jones. "If you are on foot, there is a nice short-cut to the house through them. There is nothing like them in the whole country. Now wouldn't you think, my dear, that most children would just revel in woods like those? Yet, would you believe it, Nina and Doris prefer walking primly along the highroads to exploring them. You must try and teach them to think differently, Miss Dunn."

But it was not of Nina and Doris that Ethel was thinking as the carriage swept swiftly along under the trees. That beautiful wood, she thought exultantly, belonged to her.

She was sorry when, after a while, the road, diverging to the left, parted company with the woods, which stretched away, a dark mass, to the right; but they were approaching the village, and in another moment Ethel was eagerly on the lookout for her cousins' house, which, she well remembered, was situated in the High Street.

Aylewood was a sleepy, old-world village, so irregularly built that it gave the impression that the houses had all been ready-made, and had just been dropped here and there at haphazard up the straggling street. Some were separated by iron railings and long strips of garden

from the cobbled pavement, others were built right on to it; some were turned sideways to it, while not a few, narrow though the pavement even at its widest was, had been greedy enough to steal another foot or two from it. Shops, cottages, private houses, inns were in curious juxtaposition. Yet all were alike in one thing—they all looked as though they had been built for over a hundred years.

“Whose house is that?” Ethel asked suddenly, pointing up the street to where, on the right, a big red brick Queen Anne house rose above the houses on either side of it, and separated from them by an immensely high wall. Surely, if she was not mistaken, that was the house to which she had paid her memorable visit.

“That? Oh, that belongs to the Dunmaynes,” Mrs. Jones said, with a slight quick indrawing of her breath which, though it hardly justified the name of a sniff, was something uncommonly like one.

So her memory had not played her false, then; and Ethel looked with renewed interest at her cousins’ house.

Viewed from the road, at any rate, it was not a particularly attractive looking house. The door opening on to the pavement was shut. The three windows on either side of it were closely curtained, as were the four windows on the first floor. The high walls shut out every glimpse of the other side of the house, and the whole aspect of the place seemed to say that though an unkind fate had set it down in the very midst of a village, if its own taste had been consulted, it would not have permitted another house within ten miles of it.

"Do you know the Dunmaynes?" Ethel asked when their house had been left behind.

Mrs. Jones gave an amused laugh.

"If you knew this place, my dear," she said, "you would put it the other way about, and ask if the Dunmaynes knew me. Well, they call on me about twice a year, and I do the same to them. But it isn't likely that we should get on well together, seeing that I live at Aylewood, and that anybody connected with the Manor is like a red rag to a bull to Mrs. Dunmayne."

"Like a red rag to a bull!" exclaimed Ethel. "But why?"

"No doubt, my dear, no doubt," replied Mrs. Jones, who generally contented herself with some such non-committing remark when she had not caught what was said to her. "I daresay you are right."

And with that tantalizing answer to her question, which, as Ethel told herself, was no answer at all, she was forced to be content.

"Now I expect," pursued Mrs. Jones, "you are getting quite anxious to see your pupils. We shall turn in at the lodge gates in a minute or two now."

They had left the village nearly a mile behind them, and the road, which seemed to have described two sides of a triangle in order to run through it, now joined the fir wood again, into the middle of which the carriage, by means of an open white gate and a long, sandy drive, presently turned off.

With a little thrill Ethel realized that she was actu-

ally within her own gates at last, and sitting bolt upright in the carriage she threw an eager glance right and left of her.

As soon as they got beyond the confines of the wood, an open, park-like stretch of ground dotted with fine oak trees met her view. Then the drive swept round the base of a bit of rising ground, and suddenly the house, her own house, came into sight. She had expected it to come as a surprise to her—her mind had seemed a blank when she had tried to call up its image—and yet how familiar the rambling, many gabled, red brick building appeared to her. It was certainly a beautiful old house, and, in its setting of trees and lovely grounds, was a possession that might well cause its owner's heart to swell with pride and delight. The carriage swept up to the porch, the footman sprang off the box, the butler hurried to the hall door, and Mrs. Jones, drawing Ethel's arm within her own, led her into the house.

"My dear," she said in the low voice that made it so difficult to hear what she said, "I hope you will be very happy here. It will not be my fault if you are not, for I like you very much, and I want you to feel at home here."

"Thank you very much," Ethel answered gratefully. She would have been a wretch, she thought, if she had not been grateful to Mrs. Jones for her kindness, and she was grateful; but at the same time she cast a regretful thought to the fact that two long years and five months must pass before she could enter into rightful possession of her own house.



Ethel warmed her hands at the cheerful blaze.

Crossing the hall, still with Ethel's arm in her own. Mrs. Jones entered the drawing-room, the window of which overlooked the park. Ethel uttered an involuntary expression of admiration. The view was magnificent. Miles and miles of broken, hilly country stretched away to the distant horizon. Hardly a house was visible in the whole prospect. Even the village lay out of sight in a dip of the valley.

"Pretty, isn't it?" said Mrs. Jones. "I like the other side of the house myself because of the sun, but there's no denying that this is the best view. Tea, please, at once, Parkes; and will you ask Miss Nina and Miss Doris to come here?"

The butler withdrew, and Mrs. Jones walked to the fireplace. There were two in the room, with a blazing fire in each. Near one stood a tea-table laden with shining silver and costly, fragile china.

"There is another thing you must teach them, Miss Dunn," said Mrs. Jones, as Ethel too moved on to the hearth-rug and warmed her hands at the cheerful blaze, "and that is to be here, there, and everywhere at once. They are too fond of sticking in one place at a time."

In spite of the deference that was undoubtedly due to her employer, Ethel laughed outright. What were those two children, she wondered, not to be taught? But to teach them to be in more than one place at a time was, she felt sure, beyond her power.

Her laughter caused Mrs. Jones to see the absurdity of her demand.

"Laugh away, my dear," she said with perfect contentment. "You must teach them to laugh too. At present they think it is not right for little girls to do more than smile."

At that moment the door opened gradually, and two little girls slipped almost noiselessly into the room, closing it carefully behind them. Then side by side they advanced up the long room, turning out their toes with painful care as they walked. They were dressed alike in white smocked silk frocks, underneath which they wore so many crackling, starched petticoats that the frocks stood out like little lamp-shades. Their fair, flaxen hair was drawn smoothly back from their temples and plaited in a tight pigtail. As regarded looks, they were rather plain little girls, with pale, preternaturally solemn faces.

Mrs. Jones gave a quick, impatient sigh as they came towards her.

"Why didn't you come and meet grannie, my dears?" she asked. "She thought you would have liked to come running downstairs in a hurry to see her and give her a kiss."

The two children exchanged nervous glances, and then one, whose evident year or so of seniority laid the burden of speech upon her, said,—

"Please, grandmother, Doris's hair wasn't quite tidy, and my hands had to be washed. But we are very sorry if we are late."

Mrs. Jones, guessing the tenor of this explanation, gave a despairing glance at Ethel.

"Well, never mind. You are very neat now. Give me a kiss, each of you, and then go and shake hands with that lady. She is your new—" there she paused. "That is a young lady who has kindly come to stay with me, and who is going to teach you. What do you think she is going to teach you now?"

"Our lessons, grandmother," said Nina when, in compliance with Mrs. Jones's directions, they had first of all given her a limp kiss and then an equally limp hand to Ethel.

"No, not lessons," said Mrs. Jones, putting an arm round each of them, and drawing them close to her in a loving, motherly embrace. "You guessed wrong, Nina. Now, Doris, you guess. What is that lady going to teach you?"

"To be a good little girl, grandmother," said Doris in a voice which was as serious and as utterly devoid of animation as her sister's.

"My dear, you are that already, and so is Nina. Come, Nina, it is your turn. You guess again."

"To be tidy and obedient," said Nina.

"Good gracious! no," said Mrs. Jones. "Can't you think of anything else that little girls want to learn?"

They both looked gravely at each other across Mrs. Jones's knee, and then Nina said that Aunt Selina had always told them that if little girls did their lessons well, and were good, and tidy, and obedient, there was nothing else for them to learn.

"Never mind your Aunt Selina," said Mrs. Jones

rather recklessly. "You have come to live with me now, and there is one thing I find that neither of you can do at all, and that is enjoy yourselves. So this young lady has come all the way from London to teach you how to play."

Again Nina and Doris took counsel with one another. Their perplexed glances seemed to say that their grandmother had thoroughly bewildered them. Then Doris had an idea.

"Do you mean she has come to help us to play with our dolls, grandmother?"

"Dear me, no," said Mrs. Jones. "Dolls are only for little girls who don't know other games. You are going to learn to ride a bicycle, and to climb trees, and to run races, and to shout, and to jump, and to swim, and to laugh, and to be just as happy and merry little girls as possible."

"Won't it make our hands very dirty and our hair very untidy, grandmother?" said Nina, whose eyes had grown very round and startled during the enumeration of all the pursuits that were to occupy them in future.

"I hope it will," was Mrs. Jones's reply. "Here comes tea. Now, Nina and Doris, you need not say that you will have some bread and butter, please. I daresay it is best for some little girls, but you are both going to eat cake and crumpets and jam this afternoon."

Chapter XIII.

ETHEL HEARS OF HER GRANDFATHER.

A MONTH had passed since Ethel had come to Aylewood Manor. For a whole month she had been governess, or, as Mrs. Jones preferred to put it, a "play-companion" to her two little granddaughters; and that lady was very much pleased with the change that Ethel had already wrought in them.

Their aunts Selina and Rachel had at all events instilled into them the precept that to do anything well they must devote their entire attention to it. They had also inculcated habits of implicit obedience. So that now, when their grandmother and this strange grown-up lady, who seemed greatly to enjoy the games that so often wearied them, said that they must play, they did play, to the very best of their ability at any rate, and in a painstaking, earnest manner that sometimes made Ethel go into convulsions of laughter.

She told them, too, that they must try and like the dogs and the cats, and the rabbits and guinea-pigs and white rats which their grandmother had given them, and feed and look after them themselves.

"But the cabbage leaves make my hands so wet and dirty," objected Doris.

"Never mind that," said Ethel, and set her to clean out the rabbits' hutch.

Not long afterwards Ethel heard Doris refusing to go and wash her hands because Miss Dunn liked them to have dirty hands, and they ought to try and do what she wished. But, on the whole, Ethel and her pupils understood each other very well. Ethel approved of their scrupulousness, honesty of purpose, and thorough conscientiousness; and though sometimes she longed to take them by their shoulders and see if she could shake their primness and priggishness out of them, she usually contented herself by laughing immoderately at them.

She had taken their personal appearance in hand very early in the day, and had advised that their frocks be shortened, and their many starched petticoats exchanged for serge knickers to match their frocks. Their hair, too, she had had shaken out of its pigtails and cut in a fringe across their foreheads; and though the children had been at first very much distressed and scandalized by the way it got into their eyes and tumbled over their shoulders, the change was a great improvement in their looks.

But though Ethel was thus giving perfect satisfaction to her employer, and though the docile little pupils were interesting up to a certain point, she often grew heartily tired of them.

It was a novel sensation for her to be in a house

of which she was not the central figure, and in which no one cared particularly for her, at any rate not for her own sake. Much as Mrs. Jones valued her, Ethel had discernment enough to perceive that her regard had its root in the fact that her efforts to train her grandchildren were being so successful.

"Perhaps it is doing me good to find out that I am not a person of much consequence after all," she reflected. "I wonder if it was only because I was Uncle Laurence's niece that people liked to come and talk to me at meets and tennis parties. Here nobody takes the least notice of me."

But in these self-communings Ethel scarcely did herself sufficient justice. She did not take into account the fact that at home she had been well known to everybody, whereas here no one knew her. The few people with whom she had as yet made acquaintance were several middle-aged and elderly ladies who lived in a quiet way in the village, and to whom, when they came to tea with Mrs. Jones, she could find absolutely nothing to say.

She could not display much interest in the news that the vicar's fifth child was now having measles for the third time in her short life of four years. And she yawned outright when Miss Billings said that to her certain knowledge Mrs. Abbott, the doctor's wife, had changed her cook six times since last January twelve-months.

When they came to speak of the inmates of the

Red House, her attention was certainly quickened. Mrs. Dunmayne, it seemed, was scarcely popular among her neighbours; and though none of the ladies present, as it soon transpired, knew her at all intimately, they all took pleasure in discussing her. Miss Billings complained that her manners were so cold and frigid that it was next to impossible to get on with her.

"And though I am sure she would be vexed if we gave up calling on her," sighed the little maiden lady, who led such a quiet life in the village that an afternoon call was quite a pleasurable excitement to her, "I must own that she never seems pleased to see us. And as for Tress, the old butler, he positively makes me feel that I have taken a liberty in ringing the bell. And there is really, if you come to think of it, no reason why Tress should give himself airs any more than that Mrs. Dunmayne should. She is not well off at all, although she lives in that big house, and Tress is gardener as well as butler. He helps Joan in the garden. She is devoted to gardening," pursued Miss Billings, who, delighted to have found such an attentive listener in Ethel, was quite prepared to discourse at length; "and though I am aware that the cultivation of flowers is considered quite a fashionable amusement now, and that many members of the aristocracy take an active delight in their gardens and pleasure-grounds, still I must say that I do not think it can be lady-like to garden to the extent to which Joan does. If you will believe me, Miss Dunn, she actually grows fruit for the markets, and takes money

for it. When I first heard the report I refused to credit it, and I delicately hinted to Joan one day what was being said of her; and what do you think she replied? 'Take money. Why, of course I do, Miss Billings. You don't think I send my fruit to the market to be given away, do you? How unfair that would be to the other market gardeners!' And then she laughed and nodded, and went away. Joan is always very friendly when I meet her," observed Miss Billings reflectively—"that is to say, she has none of her mother's cold, formal ways—and yet, curiously enough, I never seem to get to know her any better, or her sister Margaret either. But then Margaret is away a great deal. She is engaged, you know, to Sir William Harringay's eldest son, and she stays a great deal at Hollins Court, Sir William's place, near Brighton."

It was not until the Sunday following her arrival at Aylewood that Ethel saw her cousins. From her seat in the Dunmayne pew she glanced across the aisle to the pew exactly opposite, in which Mrs. Dunmayne and Joan were sitting. Both Hugh and Margaret were evidently away, for neither on that Sunday nor the following ones were they present in church. Joan was wonderfully like the grave-looking child of Ethel's recollection. Though not exactly handsome, she had a pleasant, rather thoughtful face, with deeply-set blue eyes and dark hair. Mrs. Dunmayne's face was cast in an altogether different mould. It was long and thin and very pale, and its cold, frigid expression was almost repellent. Ethel

could well imagine the awe which the chilling glance of her pale blue eyes would inspire in poor little Miss Billings. But Joan looked decidedly nice, and Ethel thought she would like to know her; so when, as they were all filing out of church, Mrs. Jones caught her by the arm and said in her soft whisper that she would like to introduce her to Miss Dunmayne, Ethel nodded an eager assent. They reached the porch first, and waited there until Mrs. Dunmayne, followed by her daughter, came out. The former passed Mrs. Jones with the faintest possible inclination of her head; and though it was obviously Joan's intention also to go by without speaking, she paused readily enough when Mrs. Jones addressed her and introduced Ethel.

"As you seem to be the only two young people in the parish, you ought to know one another," she said, "and it would be nice for Miss Dunn to have a companion of her own age. Couldn't you come up to tea now some day, Miss Dunmayne? What day will you fix? Any day will suit us."

"May I leave it open?" Joan said rather hurriedly. "I am rather busy just now, and—"

"Joan!" called her mother from the gate in a fretful, complaining voice, "are you coming? I am waiting."

"By all means leave it open," Ethel interposed with the sudden little lift of her chin characteristic of her when not quite pleased. "I shall be very pleased to see you if you care to come, but I should not like you to put yourself out in any way."

Joan, who had scarcely glanced at Ethel before, looked at her now with some interest, and her blue eyes gave a sudden twinkle of amusement. But before she could reply her mother called to her again, and with a brief nod of farewell Joan hurried away.

And it was now three weeks since that introduction had taken place, and Joan had not yet found time to make Ethel's acquaintance.

Apart from the longing that often and often assailed her to see her uncle again, it could not be said that Ethel was unhappy at Aylewood. She had a fair amount of time at her disposal every day, and many were the solitary rambles that she took across the fields and woods, exploring every nook and corner of the property that would one day be hers—was actually, for that matter, hers now.

Before her arrival at Aylewood she had been not unnaturally imbued with the idea that the house and the place generally would be full of memories connected with its late owner, Mr. Philip Dunmayne, the great-uncle whose heiress she was. To her astonishment no less than to her disappointment, however, she found that the Joneses seemed to have swept away all traces of the Dunmaynes.

It was true, Mrs. Jones informed Ethel when, on the day following her arrival, she took her on a tour over the house, that they had rented it furnished from the trustees; but as neither she nor her husband liked old furniture, they had relegated the old cabinets and tables,

the great stuffed chairs and the old-fashioned four-post bedsteads and huge mahogany wardrobes, to the spacious attics and lumber rooms at the top of the house, and had replaced them with modern furniture which was more to Mrs. Jones's liking.

Nor were there any old servants left in the place; and Ethel, who had hoped for some old butler or housekeeper who would find pleasure in talking of their old master, was doomed to disappointment. The servants, both indoor and outdoor, like the decorations and the furniture, were entirely modern. If there were, as was probable, a few things in each room that bore association with the past, there was no one to point them out to her; and Ethel wandered from room to room in the wake of Mrs. Jones, and took little interest in seeing the house under such auspices. She asked permission to pay a visit to the attics some day, and Mrs. Jones, though a little astonished that any one should care to visit those remote regions merely for the sake of looking at a lot of old furniture, gave a ready assent.

"Ask Mrs. Perry for the key any time you like," she said; and Ethel, nodding her thanks for the permission, mentally determined that it would not be long before she availed herself of it.

But though she did not forget her purpose, she had not yet been able to carry it into effect. Once when she had a few spare hours on her hands and sent for the keys, Mrs. Perry was out; and on another occasion when she thought of going, the housemaids were at work

there, cleaning and dusting, and as she had a fancy to be alone up there, she postponed her visit.

She had been just a month at Aylewood when a whole holiday, as unexpected as it was delightful, came her way. Mrs. Jones received a letter from a friend of her daughter's who was staying at Brighton, saying she would very much like to see the children, and asking Mrs. Jones to bring them to spend the day with her; and Mrs. Jones, who was not averse to a day's outing of that kind, accepted the invitation.

"But, my dear," she said suddenly to Ethel, "you will be so lonely here by yourself. Won't you come with us?"

But Ethel assured her so earnestly that she would not know a dull moment, that Mrs. Jones saw that she meant what she said. In fact, Ethel had already decided how she would spend her time. She would take her lunch out with her and go to Hyde's Common, eight miles away. There was a big farm there on an outlying part of the estate which she had not yet visited. She had heard that old Mr. Hurst, the man who rented it, although he was long past work himself, had been a friend of Mr. Philip Dunmayne's, and she was sure that a chat with him, if she could get him on to the subject of her grand-uncle, would prove interesting.

To her great content the day, though windy, proved fine, and having seen Mrs. Jones drive away with her two grandchildren, Ethel set out on her walk, fairly revelling in the thought of the whole long day that lay before her.

The sky was a glorious blue flecked with fleecy white clouds, which, though they might threaten rain later on, at present only served to accentuate the colour of the sky. Every field, every copse, every hedgerow was alive with the signs of the coming spring. High up in the air the larks were singing joyously, sparrows twittered and chattered and quarrelled, thrushes and blackbirds sang their loudest, numerous small birds slipped silently or with faint rustlings about their business in the hedges, and rabbits popped out of the wood and nibbled the tender corn-blades.

Ethel had a talent that almost amounted to genius for finding her way about in the country; and having ascertained the direction in which Hyde's Common lay, she found her way to it without any difficulty, and that not by the highroads, but across fields and through woods.

The common was a breezy, open space covered with gorse and young beech trees, and surrounded on three sides by a big wood. On the fourth it sloped gently away to a fertile valley, in which, snugly sheltered by the shoulder of the common above it, Mr. Hurst's farm lay. It was a cluster of many buildings, red roofed, flint walled, and overshadowed by a group of tall elm trees.

Ethel, seated on a clump of dry, withered bracken, with a tall gorse bush at her back and the sun shining on her face, had a capital bird's-eye view of it; and slowly discussing meanwhile the excellent sandwiches with which the cook had provided her, she came to the con-

clusion that Mr. Hurst must be a prosperous man. Presently she would go down and make his acquaintance; meanwhile the rest was pleasant after her long walk, and tilting her hat over her eyes, Ethel leaned her head upon one elbow, and let her thoughts wander to those far-away days when Mr. Philip Dunmayne used to ride over from the Manor to visit the farmer down below there. He must, she reflected, be a very, very old man. Her grand-uncle had been nearly seventy when he died, and that was fifteen years ago now; so that, supposing the two men had been near each other in age, Mr. Hurst must be close on ninety.

A sudden chilliness in the air roused Ethel from the half drowsy state to which her long walk and subsequent lunch were rapidly bringing her, and looking up at the sky she saw that the sun had disappeared behind a thick bank of gray, threatening-looking clouds. It would have been obvious to any one less weather-wise than Ethel that a shower was imminent, and springing up at once she looked about her for shelter. As there was nothing nearer than the farm, she made a dash for that; and so quickly did the rain come up that she had hardly time to gain the gate before the first heavy drops fell. As she ran up the path, the door of the farmhouse opened wide, and a pleasant, rosy-cheeked woman in a print gown and with her arms bare to the elbow bade her enter.

"I saw you coming, miss," she said, "and I hope you'll take shelter till the rain is over."

"Thank you very much," Ethel said, pleased at the

tone of welcome in the woman's voice. She concluded, and rightly, that it must be young Mrs. Hurst to whom she was speaking.

"I hope you'll go in and talk to the grandfather a bit while I finish my butter. It's one of his bad days, poor dear! and nothing cheers him up like a bit of a chat with a stranger who can give him a bit of news. And if he's a bit crotchety, miss, you'll bear with him, I'm sure."

Nothing being more in accordance with Ethel's own wishes than a chat with the old man, she willingly consented to the suggestion, and followed her hostess into an inner parlour, where in a high, straight-backed chair propped with cushions, and with his slippered feet resting on a stool, old Mr. Hurst sat nodding over a newspaper. He roused himself with a start as the door opened, and complained that his eyes were very bad that afternoon, very bad indeed.

"It's the light that's bad," his daughter-in-law said in cheerful, kindly tones. "But you needn't try your eyes any more. Here is a young lady come to talk to you while I finish the butter.—Sit down here, miss, and," in a whisper, "cheer him up a bit if you can. He's rather low to-day, poor dear!"

So saying, Mrs. Hurst placed a chair for Ethel, gave its already spotless surface a whisk over with her apron, and was out of the room and on her way back to her butter in less time than it takes to tell.

Ethel sat down feeling a little helpless and bewildered.

To cheer up an old man whom she had never seen before, and with whom she did not in the least know what the matter was, might prove a task of some difficulty. But she soon found that her rôle was to be an entirely passive one. It was talking, not being talked to, that Mr. Hurst liked; and once started he rambled on, requiring only a word here and there to keep him going. He was a little, wizened-looking old man, and owing to the loss of his teeth he mumbled, so that it was not always easy to catch all he said.

But he appeared to have all his wits about him nevertheless, and when he heard that Ethel was staying at Aylewood Manor he leaned forward with an air of marked interest.

“Aylewood Manor!” he said in his thin, quavering voice. “To think of that now! It’s long since any one from the old house sat here. Eh, but it was a shame, that was!”

Ethel thought he meant that it was a shame that no one from the Manor ever came to see him, and she was about to interpose with a soothing remark to the effect that she was sure Mrs. Jones, at any rate, would gladly pay him a visit if he desired one, when, without heeding her, he rambled on,—

“He wor a good friend to me wor old Mr. Philip. I haven’t a word to say again’ him; but I do say that because he didn’t like Mr. James, that wor no reason for keeping his children out of the place. And to leave it to a slip of a girl when there was that fine, upstanding,

young Mr. Hugh—him that have won all those honours and glories a-fighting them Boers in South Africky—worn't right, that it worn't. But Mr. Philip wor a good friend to me. Eh, it's many the crack we used to have together. There's not many left like him. I mind when we were young—"

But at that point Ethel, though she was giving her very best attention to every word that fell from his lips, lost the thread of his discourse for a while. His voice had sunk to an indistinct murmur. Presently it grew clearer, and she gathered that he was referring again to some quarrel that her grand-uncle had had with a Mr. James.

She ventured to interrupt him.

"Who was Mr. James?" she asked.

"Mr. James wor Mr. James," the old man said peevishly. "Who else should he be? Mr. James Dunmayne, his brother, and his rightful heir, to be sure."

"His brother, yes, but not his rightful heir," Ethel said, leaning a little forward in her chair. "His heir would be his brother Charles—and my grandfather," she was about to add, but checked herself in time.

"Ay, ay! Mr. Charles; I remember him too. A wild slip of a lad; foolish, too. He married the parson's daughter, he did, and her without any money. They bought a commission in the army for him, they did, and shipped him off to India. A roving lad always; came to no good either. Fond of steeplechasing and such like, and broke his neck a-playing a game on horseback. What

else could he look for, a-riding a horse reared in them heathenish lands? Now Mr. Philip wor a judge of horses, if you like. I reklect—" And Mr. Hurst, his chin sunk so low on his breast that it was almost impossible to hear what he said, gave Ethel a long, incoherent account of some horse show which he and Mr. Philip had attended, and at which the old squire had got the better of half the dealers in the country. It might not have proved a particularly interesting tale even if she could have heard it; but as she could not catch one half of what he said, she waited with what patience she could command for it to come to an end. Then with quiet persistence she returned to her point, framing her question this time in a different way.

"How many brothers had Mr. Philip Dunmayne?" she asked.

But the old man only stared at her vacantly. Either he was tired or his brain was incapable of standing the strain of answering a direct question. After a moment's pause his thin, feeble voice continued,—

"Eh, but it was a sad quarrel. It didn't hurt him that he quarrelled with neither; but it was Mr. Edmund, and now Mr. Hugh—Captain Hugh, that is—that has to bear the brunt of it all. Poor Captain Hugh, who never had no quarrel with his grand-uncle neither; it ain't fair, that it ain't!"

The old farmer's voice had become astonishingly strong during the utterance of the last few sentences, and as he concluded he brought his heavy stick, on the top of

which his gnarled old hands were folded, with quite a vigorous thump on to the floor.

At that moment there was a rattle of teacups outside the door, and Mrs. Hurst, with a tray and a folded cloth in her hand, came into the room.

"Talking about old Mr. Philip, father?" she asked, as she set down the tray and proceeded to lay the cloth across one end of the long oaken table that stood in the middle of the room.—"You'll bear with his talk, won't you, miss?" she added in a low aside. "It does him good to be brought out of himself a bit, and though he gets a bit contentious like, he don't mean no harm.—You'll be ready for a cup of tea, father, as soon as the kettle boils, and perhaps the young lady will take a cup with you. The rain isn't going to give over yet awhile."

She looked out of the window as she spoke, and Ethel, although far too much interested in the old man's talk to have any attention at all to spare for the weather, followed her glance mechanically. But it was, as Mrs. Hurst said, still raining, and the sky showed no signs of clearing. She left the room again on an errand connected with the kettle, and Ethel, in the hope of inducing the old man to resume his speech at the point at which it had been interrupted, asked him what was not fair.

"Why, that Mr. Hugh should be done out of what was his by right, just because Mr. James and Mr. Philip had a quarrel," Mr. Hurst answered in the same surprisingly vigorous tone in which he had last spoken. "Mr. James may have been a bit extravagant. I mind how—"

Ethel's heart sank. She feared another long, rambling tale of those bygone days, but the anecdote seemed to have slipped his memory. He hesitated, stammered, and Ethel repeated his last words in a soft tone,—

“Mr. James may have been a bit extravagant.”

“He wor that for certain,” the old man broke in eagerly; “and Mr. Philip, though he wor a good friend to me, and I won't hear a word again' him, had his faults, and he wor terrible bad-tempered and stubborn. They ain't qualities that often go together, but with Mr. Philip it were different. He never repented in his cool moments of the things he had said in his hot ones, but just stuck to them grimly. Well, when he was about thirty, and Mr. James a year or two younger, they both fell in love with the same lady, and that was the cause of all the bitterness between them. The lady liked Mr. James best, and after that matters went from bad to worse between the two brothers. There ain't no manner of doubt that Mr. James had made up his mind that now his brother would never marry, and so he, as the next heir, ought to have a large sum of money settled on him; and Mr. Philip, though he could be generous enough when he chose, wouldn't have no man, not even his own brother, a-telling him of what he ought to do. And that led to a quarrel, and the end of it all was that Mr. James was turned out of the house, and he married the lady and went away. He never saw his brother again, for he died soon after. We heard there was children, but we didn't take much interest till, some thirty years after, Mr. Philip being

then over sixty and still unmarried, his nephew, Mr. Edmund, as was Mr. James's son, bought the Red House, and came to live in it. He was married, too, and any one could see with half an eye that he wanted to try and make it up with his uncle—as was nat'ral, mind you, the property not being entailed. But Mr. Philip wouldn't have nothing to do with him, not even when little Mr. Hugh, as bonnie a boy as ever I saw, was born. I don't say nothing again' Mr. Philip for not liking Mr. Edmund—he worn't ever a fav'rite in these parts—but he should have done justice to the little chap. But when he died, it wor found that the old place, and every stick and stone belonging to it, was left to his brother Charles. The will was dated the day of Mr. James's marriage, which showed that it was not any love for one brother, but anger again' the other, that had led him to make it. Mr. Edmund was dreadfully upset about it, and his wife wanted him to contest the will; but unfair though it was, they had no legal ground to go upon, and the property had to go to Mr. Charles's heir, who was a mere girl. It ain't nothing to do with me," the old man's quavering voice, shrill now with indignation, went on, "but it do make me mad to think of that fine place, with them grand woods and the shooting and all, belonging to just a slip of a girl, when there was a fine young gentleman like Captain Hugh, who ought to have had it."

Ethel could scarcely help smiling. The sudden allusion to herself, the way in which she had been linked on to this past history of the family to which she belonged

excited her imagination. But she must set the old man right on one point. He did not seem to understand that she—or rather Ethel Dunmayne—being descended from the second brother, had prior claim over the descendants of the third.

“So although she is only a girl, she has more right to be the heiress than her cousin Hugh,” she said, “for her grandfather was older than Hugh’s grandfather.”

Mr. Hurst’s wits had been sharpened by the long conversation.

“No, no,” he said, grasping the point with unexpected quickness; “Mr. James wor the second brother, and Mr. Charles the third. Ten years there wor between them, too. Never got on with either of his brothers, did Mr. Charles. They were men while he was still a mere lad; and though Mr. Philip wor his guardian like, he wouldn’t do nothing he telled him, but left school early, didn’t stay long at college neither, and finally married and went off to Indy. And to think that it is his granddaughter who gets the place. It ain’t fair; it ain’t fair. Not,” he added, “that it will do her much good, poor thing; for she’s dead, poor thing.”

“What!” Ethel cried, startled out of her self-possession. “I’m—she’s not dead.”

“Yes, she’s dead, poor young thing,” the old man mumbled. “Didn’t do her much good.”

But Ethel persisted. “I tell you she’s not dead. She lives, or did live till the other day, with her uncle in Devonshire.”

“Poor young thing, poor young thing!” said the old man, whose voice was growing momentarily more feeble. “It was sad, very sad. Burnt to death was what they said. Well, well, it all happened years ago—or was it the other day? I can’t remember. Mr. Philip, I know he’s dead. Died in his chair, the big armchair in his library, he did; and Mr. James and Mr. Edmund is dead too, and the slip of a girl gets it all.”

Oh clearly, Ethel thought, the poor old man’s mind was wandering. The information that she was dead had given her quite a shock for the moment, but it passed as soon as she perceived that he no longer realized what he was saying. He must have been wandering, too, when he asserted that Mr. James was older than Mr. Charles. Of course he had mixed up the two brothers. After all, it could not be wondered at if such a very old man grew a little hazy on matters of that sort.

Chapter XIV.

"AN INIQUITOUS WILL."

"**W**OULD you be so kind, Miss Dunn, as to go on an errand into the village for me?" Mrs. Jones said the next morning, coming into the schoolroom where Ethel was standing at the window staring out rather listlessly at the gray skies and drizzling rain. Both her pupils were in bed with incipient colds, caught, it was supposed, by waiting at the draughty railway station the day before, and Ethel was for once at a loss to know what to do with herself. Somehow she lacked the energy to go for another long walk into the country. But a walk into the village, and for a purpose, was a different matter. It would while away the morning very satisfactorily.

"It is nothing very nice, I am afraid, Miss Dunn," Mrs. Jones said, noticing the alacrity with which Ethel had acceded to her request. "It is to collect money for the annual outing that is given every year to the old folks in the parish. I would much rather write a cheque for the amount myself than go round to the different houses; and I did so one year, but gave such dreadful offence that I have never dared to do it again. Yet I know some of

the subscriptions are not given very willingly. However, there the matter stands. Look, I have written down the names of the people who give every year, in this little book, so all you have to do is to call at their houses. I am so much obliged to you, my dear, for being willing to go; for I must confess that I dislike going myself, and especially to the Dunmaynes. Mrs. Dunmayne is always scrupulously polite, but she chills me more than any one I know, and I am never at ease with her."

No sooner did Ethel gather that she was being given a valid pretext for visiting the Red House than her willingness to oblige Mrs. Jones changed into downright eagerness to set off on her mission without loss of time; and armed with the little book containing the addresses of the houses she was to visit, and a big purse to receive the money, she started off.

She decided to keep the Dunmaynes until the last; so it was not until she had called at the doctor's house, and the grocer's, and Mrs. Joyce's, the veterinary surgeon's, the draper's, and at several others, that she mounted the steps that led to the door of the Red House and pulled the long-handled bell.

A thrill of irrepressible excitement ran through her as she listened to the jangling echoes dying away in the distance. A minute or two afterwards the door was opened by a grim-looking elderly man, who was evidently the old butler of whose manner Miss Billings and the other ladies had complained.

He admitted Ethel with obvious reluctance, and showed

her into a room looking over the garden. As Ethel stepped over the threshold the remembrance of the room flashed swiftly back to her mind. It seemed to her that nothing in it had been changed since the day on which her uncle had brought her down to make the acquaintance of her cousins. Though she had not been conscious until then of having retained any recollection of it, it must surely have always been the same prim, formal room it was now—a room which, with its drawn venetian blinds, its stiffly arranged furniture, and lack of books and flowers, had the air of being seldom or never used. It was from the window seat in the corner over there that Mrs. Dunmayne had risen to greet Sir Laurence, and she remembered as distinctly as though it had been yesterday the sudden harsh laugh which her cousin Edmund had uttered when she informed him that she was the heiress of Aylewood. She could almost feel again the chilly, uncomfortable silence that had fallen upon the room as she made the childish boast. And then the small cousin had been summoned up, and she had been sent out into the garden to play with the other children. A sudden desire to look at the garden seized her, and crossing the room she poked two of the slats of the venetian blind apart and peered through them. A quiet space of green, shaded lawn met her view. It was enclosed on two sides by high walls, and sloped gently away from the house, so that the end of the garden was not within sight of the windows.

Beyond the lawn the ground was planted with strawberries in long, regular lines, and a flicker of amusement

crossed Ethel's face as her eyes took note of them. Those must be the strawberries which, to Miss Billings' scandal, Joan grew for market. As she looked at them, Joan herself, with a light fork in her hand, came up the garden and crossed the lawn towards the house. Her face wore a pre-occupied, intent look, and she was dressed in a very short skirt, a loose, shabby coat, stout boots, and thick gloves. But her attire rather commended itself than otherwise to Ethel's mind. She liked to see people dressed suitably for the work they had in hand. She felt certain that she would get on with this cousin at all events, if only she could make her acquaintance.

"If you please, miss, Mrs. Dunmayne would be glad if you would kindly say on what business you have called."

Ethel had been so absorbed in the scrutiny of her cousin that she had not heard Tress come into the room, and she turned to find him watching her with an air of grim disapproval.

"On what business?" she said rather vaguely. "Oh yes, I remember. Will you tell her, please, that I have come from Mrs. Jones to call for the subscription to the old people's outing fund." Practice had rendered her familiar with the formula, which ran easily off her tongue now.

The man withdrew, to return in a few minutes with a sovereign and a shilling laid out on a silver salver. Ethel gathered up the money and entered the amount in her notebook with a feeling of disappointment that she was not to see her cousins. Tress conducted her

towards the door with the air of a policeman seeing a small boy off private premises.

As she went through the hall the glass door leading into it from the garden opened and admitted Joan, and acting on a sudden impulse Ethel turned and went towards her.

"How do you do?" she said. "I saw you in the garden just now." She uttered the first words that came into her head, anxious not to let this chance of improving her cousin's acquaintance slip. It was plain, however, that Joan, though she could do no less than shake the hand held out to her, by no means shared the desire for a better acquaintanceship between them. She murmured a few stiff, conventional words in reply, and then looked expectantly at Tress, who, hovering indignantly in the background, would have been only too glad to resume the interrupted progress toward the front door. But Ethel, though quite aware of her cousin's inhospitable wish to see the last of her, was not yet ready to go.

"You haven't been to call on me yet," she said; "so if you are too busy to come to me, may I come down here and see you instead? I should like to know you, and to be friends with you."

For, after all, Ethel reflected, if she never saw her cousins, how was she to become friendly with them? And unless she became friendly with them now, in her assumed character of a poor governess, they would never consent to accept the many kindnesses she meant to show them when she came in for her money and property.

But Joan Dunmayne, who could not, of course, know why this stranger was so desirous of seeking her intimacy, received her proffer of friendship with marked coldness, and a gleam of mischievous appreciation of the embarrassment she was causing her cousin flitted across Ethel's face. Unfortunately Joan caught the expression, and her tone showed that she resented it.

"I am sorry," she said, "but I have little time for making friends, so I am afraid that it would be no use asking you to come here and see me."

"But you take walks surely sometimes," urged Ethel. "Won't you let me come with you for one, some day?"

Joan hesitated. To refuse would be downright rude; and yet after the cool way in which she had received the other's offer of friendship, she felt that Ethel would deserve all she might get if she persisted in making overtures to her.

"I very seldom take long walks," she said.

"And, in short, you would rather not have anything to do with me, only you don't quite like to say so," Ethel cut in audaciously, the dancing light in her eyes showing that she was not in the least offended with her cousin's reluctance to make her acquaintance. It was difficult to withstand Ethel's gay, laughing tones, and for a moment it seemed as if they would even dissipate the chilly reserve of her cousin's manner; but before she could reply, a peevish, querulous voice came from a half-opened door on the left of the passage.

"Really, Joan," it said, "if you and that lady are going

to stand there talking any more, I will be glad if you will kindly shut this door first. I am not well enough this morning to bear any strange voices."

After that Ethel beat a retreat so hasty that it might almost have been called a flight. If that peevish, querulous voice belonged to Mrs. Dunmayne, as she had no doubt it did, she had no desire to make her acquaintance at all events.

But though her visit, as regarded any progress she had made towards an intimacy with her cousins, might be spoken of as a distinct failure, she took away with her the impression that Joan had relented somewhat towards the last, and that if Mrs. Dunmayne had not broken in so peremptorily upon their conversation a good understanding might have been established between them after all.

When she got home that morning, which she did just in time for lunch, she found that her small charges were not only still in bed, but were likely to remain there for some days. Mrs. Jones, alarmed at a slight rise in their temperatures, had sent for Dr. Abbott, and he had told her that, although he could not be sure for a day or two, he feared they were both sickening for measles, which was prevalent in the village at that time. He had ordered them to stay in bed, and had promised to look in again in the course of the afternoon.

"So I am afraid you will be left very much to yourself for the next week or two," Mrs. Jones said; "for, of course, I shall nurse the chicks myself, and equally of course you must not go near them, or we shall have you getting

measles too. Now remember you must make yourself more at home than ever here, and just come and go as you please. But even so, I am afraid you will find it very dull being left to yourself so much."

"Indeed I shan't," Ethel protested, with an earnestness that might, had Mrs. Jones been disposed to be critical, have sounded uncomplimentary. "I shall get on all right by myself, you'll see."

There was no doubt, however, she reflected, as after lunch she went upstairs to put on her out-door things again, that she could have enjoyed herself very much more if she had had a companion of her own age to go about with. Now, if Joan had not so distinctly repelled her advances, they might have become quite good friends. So that it was in rather a chastened mood that Ethel set out on a lonely walk. The rain had stopped, but it was a gray, gloomy day, with a cold north-easterly wind blowing. To avoid it as much as possible Ethel sought the shelter of the woods, and as she walked along at a brisk pace underneath the trees her thoughts went back to the unsatisfactory visit she had paid her cousins that morning. And yet she could not be offended at Joan's reluctance to meet her advances half way, because it had been evident that she was in no way responsible for that same reluctance. Joan could have no personal objection to her, for the simple reason that she knew nothing about her; and though the idea certainly occurred to her that perhaps Miss Dunn, the governess, was not considered worthy of Miss Dunmayne's acquaintance, the idea was

instantly scouted. Joan, whatever sort of girl she might be, was not that sort.

Still Ethel was not accustomed to having her advances treated so cavalierly. All through her not very long life of eighteen years people had shown themselves pretty generally ready to be on good terms with her. She would have given something, she thought, to have had one or two of her friends with her that afternoon—Nora, for instance, with her gay chatter; or one of the boys; or even Ida, who had behaved so badly in not writing to her. Had Sir Laurence, she wondered, gone over to Barnstown and told Ida why she had never turned up there. He would have been obliged to give some reason for her abrupt departure from his house, and she could not imagine her uncle giving any explanation but a true one. Doubtless, then, Ida had decided that she was no longer worthy of her friendship, and that was the reason of her silence.

"What with friends who won't know me any longer, and cousins who won't begin to know me, I seem to be left pretty much to myself," Ethel thought. "Well, I don't care. Shall I go and see Mr. Hurst again, and get him to tell me some more about old Mr. Philip? No, it is too far. What I will do, though, is to go into the church and see if I can find the dates of their births on their tombstones. I don't for a moment believe that Mr. Hurst was right when he said that my grandfather was younger than my grand-uncle, but still it would be interesting to see. I wonder I never thought of it before."

For some time she had been forcing her way through a dense bit of covert, formed chiefly of hazel and bramble bushes, but presently she struck a narrow, grassy drive, that led her gradually downhill. For once her sense of locality was at fault, and she could not make out at all where she was. She had expected to be brought out on to the road at a point between the village and the station, but she felt sure that this path was taking her in an opposite direction. Curiosity, however, to see where it led induced her to follow it, and she strolled on until, taking a sharp turn, it brought her at one and the same time to a stile and to the edge of the wood.

A big field planted with little clumps of young trees lay before her. The ground sloped down to the banks of the river Ayle that flowed sluggishly through the middle of it, to rise again somewhat steeply on the other side. A board marked private stared her in the face; but in the belief that the field belonged to the Manor House, Ethel climbed the stile and made her way across the long, damp grass, feeling pretty sure that the village lay on the other side of the slope she was about to climb. When she got to the brink of the stream she found that not only was it a good deal wider and deeper than she had thought, but that there was no sign of a bridge either up or down its banks. To jump, then, was her only alternative; and hunting about until she found a good take off—for in some parts the banks were muddy, and in others the edges were crumbling—she walked back a few paces, took a short run, and just cleared the water. It was a good jump, and Ethel

was far too pleased at her own success to pay any heed to another big notice-board that confronted her on the other side. This walk, she thought, was proving even more interesting than she had expected, and it was not until she had passed through the thick belt of trees that crowned the top of the field and found herself in a shubbery of rhododendron bushes that the fact that she was trespassing, not only on private grounds, but in some one's garden, could no longer be ignored. Yet she could not go back. Comparatively easy though it had been to her to jump the river from the further side, she had grave doubts of her ability to clear it successfully from this; and though it would not be pleasant to be prosecuted for trespassing, it would really be preferable to getting a ducking in such cold weather.

So she followed the moss-grown path that wound through the bushes, until a sudden unexpected turn brought her out, not only into a private garden, as she had feared, but into the garden of the Red House of all others! It was into a corner of the big kitchen garden that the path had led her, and on all sides of her were long lines of the strawberry plants which Joan grew for market.

Ethel's position was sufficiently awkward. She had to choose now between retracing her steps and risking a ducking, or going forward with the certainty of getting a snubbing from her cousins. But, after all, the burden of choice was not left with her, for a sudden voice broke in upon her meditations; and looking in the direction from

which it proceeded, she saw Mrs. Dunmayne and Joan and a second girl, who could be none other than Margaret, sitting on a bench just within the shelter of the trees, and not many yards distant from her.

Joan was in the shabby attire she had worn that morning, and presented a great contrast to Margaret, who was in a neat tailor-made dress of dark blue cloth, with a smart little toque to match. Mrs. Dunmayne, well wrapped up from the cold in a fur cloak, and with her head muffled in a fleecy white shawl, sat between them.

"How you can slave away all day like a common working-man beats me, Joan," Margaret was saying. "All the time I was away I kept thinking of you in this dull old garden, and it spoilt all my pleasure. Yes," she repeated, blushing a little as she met the half-tender, half-quizzical look her sister gave her, "all my pleasure."

"Dull old garden!" Joan answered. "Why, I love it, and when you are married I mean to start a regular nursery garden here. Roses, violets, and strawberries shall be my specialities, I think, and I shall be a millionaire before you know where you are."

"A millionaire indeed!" said Margaret scoffingly; "you are more likely to become a rheumatic bankrupt. To my certain knowledge you spent half your last dress allowance on chemical manures, and your winter coat is represented by that bedful of silly, withered little rose trees."

"It is not fair to criticise rose trees in March," Joan protested; "wait until June. And, please," she added, laughing, "don't prophesy such awful things about my

future. It is rather hard lines to make me rheumatic and a bankrupt at the same time."

"If it had not been for that iniquitous will of your grand-uncle's there would never have been any talk of bankruptcy for any of my children," Mrs. Dunmayne said, her voice breaking fretfully in upon their gay laughing ones. Neither of her daughters answered her. It was evident from their manner that that same iniquitous will was a well-known subject which it was as well to avoid.

So while Margaret sat and with dreaming eyes played absently with the diamond ring she wore on the third finger of her left hand, Joan rose briskly to her feet.

"I must go and water," she was beginning, when her eyes fell upon Ethel, and her speech was arrested by surprise. "You here again!" her glance seemed to say.

Ethel advanced, feeling far too excited at what she had unwittingly overheard to be conscious of any embarrassment. The words "that iniquitous will" hummed in her brain. So that, then, was the reason why her cousins had always held aloof from her. They thought she had no right to Aylewood.

"Whose will was iniquitous?" she demanded eagerly, "and why was it iniquitous?"

Mrs. Dunmayne's face had perceptibly stiffened when her daughter's sudden silence had drawn her attention to the spot where Ethel stood, and it was quite obvious that she was prepared to receive her apologies in a very frigid manner indeed. But when, instead of offering any, the intruder coolly proceeded to question them on the

subject of the conversation she had overheard, astonishment and anger momentarily deprived Mrs. Dunmayne of all power of speech. With uplifted eyebrows she gave Ethel a glance of crushing severity; one which, had the recipient not been entirely oblivious to everything but anxiety for the answer to her questions, could not have failed to make her aware of the enormity of the offence she was committing. But as her glance had failed to bring the culprit to her senses, Mrs. Dunmayne was obliged to speak, and she showed her intense displeasure by ignoring Ethel and her question altogether.

"Joan," she said, turning to her daughter, "this lady has clearly found her way in here by mistake. Will you show her the way to the garden gate?"

And with that Mrs. Dunmayne rose, and without bestowing another glance upon Ethel turned to leave the spot.

But Ethel, still so dominated by the wish to fathom the meaning of Mrs. Dunmayne's mysterious phrase as to be oblivious to everything else, ran after her.

"Oh, don't go," she said, "until you have told me why that will was iniquitous. You don't know how much I want to know why you said it was."

"Really, Miss Dunn," Mrs. Dunmayne said, looking at her very much as though she thought that Mrs. Jones's governess had taken leave of her senses, "I am not in the habit of discussing my private affairs with strangers, or," she added, "of answering the impertinent questions of such ill-bred persons as yourself."

Ethel received this snub with an equanimity that confirmed Mrs. Dunmayne in the idea that Mrs. Jones's governess was a very strange young person indeed. Without exhibiting any signs of embarrassment she looked thoughtfully at Mrs. Dunmayne, and slowly nodded her head.

"No, no, of course not," she said; "I forgot. Oh, well, well, it can't be helped. I daresay I shall know all about it some day."

She appeared to fall into a brown study, and the parting glance of mingled astonishment and dislike which Mrs. Dunmayne gave her passed quite harmlessly over her.

Joan's voice, nearly as cold as her mother's, recalled her to herself. "This is the way to the gate," she said.

"Ah, thanks," Ethel answered, following her.

Margaret, who throughout the brief scene had not spoken a single word, remained behind on the bench.

"I suppose," Ethel said in rather an absent tone, "I ought to apologize for trespassing; but really when I jumped across the stream I had not the least idea where I was going, and I came upon you quite unexpectedly."

"There is a notice-board marked private on this side of the river, I believe," Joan returned rather dryly.

"Yes; but I saw it too late," Ethel answered with some indifference. "Won't you," she asked, fixing her eyes upon her cousin, "tell me what will was iniquitous, and why it was iniquitous?"

"Really, Miss Dunn," Joan answered, "you are the most inquisitive person I have ever met."

"Ah," said Ethel, "now that is the first straight thing you have said to me. You have always kept me at arm's length, and been perfectly civil yet politely nasty to me all the time. Is it just because I am living at Aylewood Manor that you don't like me?"

"Yet another question, Miss Dunn," Joan replied, struggling to repress a smile. "Is that the only idea you have of making conversation?"

"Just now it is," Ethel said, smiling too. Both girls thought the other nice when she smiled, and for the first time Joan began to feel something of the attraction towards Ethel that Ethel had, even at the beginning of their unpromising acquaintance, felt for her cousin. The barrier of reserve behind which Joan had intrenched herself had for the moment broken down, and Ethel pushed her way eagerly through the opening.

"I do so want to know all about you, and to be friends with you," she said.

"So you have already said," Joan remarked. "I did not know that I was so attractive to strangers before."

"Now you are laughing at me," said Ethel, quick to realize that that alone betokened that she had made headway with her cousin. Joan would not have laughed at any one she disliked.

"Well," Joan said more seriously, "people can't be friends all in a moment, can they?"

"Of course they can't," Ethel said, pursuing her advantage. "They must see something of one another first,

and get to know each other. From the first moment I saw you I wanted to be friends with you."

"Why?" Joan asked, pausing beside the gate in the wall through which Ethel was evidently to take her departure.

"Because you are my cousin, and when I come into my money I want to do no end for you, and you would be too proud to accept anything from me unless you like me," Ethel would have answered if she had spoken the truth. But as she did not want to do that, she contented herself with an answer that was no answer at all. "Because I did," she said gaily. "Who is asking questions now? And that reminds me that you have not answered the one I asked you, 'Whose will was iniquitous, and why was it iniquitous?' Now don't," she said, as Joan lifted her chin with a gesture which, had Ethel only known it, was characteristic of herself also—"don't get on your high horse, and go on about my being inquisitive, but just tell me."

The slight reserve which was creeping over Joan's manner again was not proof against her cousin's audacious reference to it. But for all that she refused to gratify her curiosity.

"The story of the will is such an old, old one now that it would be far better forgotten altogether," she said, her brows knitting themselves together in a slight frown. "It does us no good at any rate to remember it; but if you really want to find out all about it, there are plenty of people who can tell you."

There was a slight flavour of sarcasm, kindly but

unmistakable, in Joan's last words; but Ethel was as impervious to the tacit rebuke they conveyed as she had been to Mrs. Dunmayne's cutting speeches. Once her mind became filled with thoughts of that will, fine shades of manner and angry snubs were alike thrown away upon her.

At that juncture Margaret's voice broke in upon the conversation.

"Joan, Joan," it called, "if you are coming to the station to meet Hugh, it is time we started now. And you have got to change; don't forget that."

So with just a hasty nod the two girls parted; and it was not until the bolts were shot behind her, and she was some way up the lane leading to the highroad, that Ethel recollected that nothing had been arranged for their next meeting. Well, if Hugh were returning to-day, she had better leave the brother and sisters to themselves for a few days. Early next week she would go and see Joan again.

Meanwhile Mrs. Dunmayne's allusion to the iniquitous will gave her no peace. Would there, she wondered, be an account of the Dunmaynes in the history of the county? They had lived there for four generations at least. Perhaps she would get a clue to Mrs. Dunmayne's words if she consulted it.

Before she went home, however, she would carry out the purpose she had formed of visiting the church and ascertaining by the dates on the tombstones the respective ages of the three brothers. If she hurried there would be just light enough left to read the inscriptions.

As a rule, the old parish church of Aylewood was kept

locked; but this afternoon the organist happened to be practising there, and pushing open the door, which was partly ajar, Ethel entered the dim, cold building, and treading softly up the aisle crossed to the side chancel, where the tablets of the Dunmaynes had their place.

There were only three. The first, which was over the other two, was to the memory of John Dunmayne of Aylewood Manor. It was so high up that in the fading light Ethel could not clearly make out the date of his birth and death. However, as it had at the moment no particular interest for her, she passed on to the next tablet, which was immediately below it. This was an oblong stone, and the inscription on it ran:—

“And to the memory of the three sons of the above.

PHILIP.

Born 1820. Died 13th January 1885.

JAMES.

Born 1823. Died 7th May 1877.

CHARLES.

Born 1833. Died 21st March 1860.”

The third tablet was to the memory of Edmund Dunmayne, eldest nephew of Philip Dunmayne, with a notice to the effect that it had been put up by his widow. That stone also had no interest for Ethel. It was on the second that she concentrated all her attention, and it was with a startled look on her face that she read over and over again the few brief lines it contained. It was then established beyond the possibility of all doubt that her grandfather, Charles Dunmayne, had been younger, ten years younger, than his second brother James. That,

then, was why her cousin Alice had spoken so bitterly of the iniquitous will, why old Mr. Hurst had said in his quavering tones that an injustice had been done to Hugh, and why years and years ago her young cousins had received her in such a hostile manner. In her they had seen the little girl who had stepped into the place that belonged rightfully to her cousin Edmund; for, of course, in the natural order of things, James's descendants, and not Charles's, should have inherited the property.

In a still more thoughtful mood than the one in which she had entered the church, Ethel left it, and slowly betook herself homewards. It was easy to understand now why her cousin Alice had tacitly refused to have anything to do with her. It seemed hard that she should visit her resentment upon her young cousin; and yet there was no doubt, Ethel reflected, that she had now fathomed the reason both of her cold reception at the Red House years ago, and why there had been no intercourse between them since.

Yet Sir Laurence had been no party to the estrangement that had existed between the two branches of the family. As clearly as though it had only taken place the day before, she recalled the conversation she had had with her uncle when, having had her cousins brought to her mind by the Anstruthers' friend, Mr. Bertie Chester, she had asked Sir Laurence to invite the two girls to stay with them. He had told her then that it would be useless for him to do so, for their mother would not permit them to come.

Thinking the matter out as she walked through the park, Ethel saw that he must have known of the bitter feeling his cousin's wife had for her, and the reason why she entertained it; and presently an instinct for which she could not account, but which she knew was a true one, told her that her uncle's sympathies were with the other side. Though he had never said a word which might lead her to suppose that such was the case, she was convinced that the will that had given her Aylewood appeared to him every whit as unjust as it appeared to her cousins. The fact that the injustice had been perpetrated two generations ago would not weigh one iota with him. If he, and not her father, had been the elder son, Ethel knew that he would never have consented to benefit by his uncle's will, but would have made over the property to his cousin as soon as ever it came into his hands. And her father must have been aware what his brother's ideas on the subject were, and it was more than probable that when he knew that he was dying he made Sir Laurence promise not to seek to convert her, Ethel, to his views.

Everything pointed to the correctness of that surmise. The very care with which he had abstained from telling her that her grandfather and his father had been the third, and not the second, brother was a proof of it. If she had made that all-important discovery, what more natural than for her to inquire, Why, then, did she, and not her cousins, inherit the Aylewood property? And Sir Laurence, though it seemed he could keep his own counsel, had apparently distrusted his powers of hiding

from her quick-witted observation the fact that in his opinion, if things were as they ought to have been, her cousins would have inherited the property; and so in order to keep his word to her father he had avoided the subject altogether.

But, after all, she argued, a man had a perfect right to leave his money to whom he pleased; and if her grand-uncle preferred to leave his to his brother Charles rather than to his brother James, why should he not do so? At any rate it was not for her to find fault with the disposition he had made of his money, and a slight feeling of resentment against Sir Laurence for not approving of it on her behalf took possession of her.

Did he, she wondered, think that she ought to relinquish the property in favour of her cousins? Ethel's eyes wandered over the wide, fair prospect of fields and woods that lay before her, all of which would some day be hers, and dismissed the idea as soon as it arose. Sir Laurence might regret that his uncle had left it as he had, but that was a very different matter from thinking that the will ought to be set aside, and Mr. Philip Dunmayne's wishes entirely disregarded by his descendants.

Chapter XV.

ETHEL MAKES A DISCOVERY.

“**M**EASLES without doubt, but in a very mild form. Not the least cause for anxiety, my dear Mrs. Jones, not the very least.”

Such was Dr. Abbott's verdict the next morning, after he had paid a visit to the big, airy room where Nina and Doris lay in their little white beds, taking their illness as apathetically as they took everything else. They had dolls and picture books and toys in plenty, and were quite contented and happy.

The doctor's advice to Ethel had been to keep out of doors as much as possible, so as to run no risk of infection, and Ethel would have been glad enough to follow his advice had the weather not been so hopelessly bad. The day before it had rained, but this morning it was pouring cats and dogs. If to stay in the house was to run the risk of infection, to venture out was to court a certain bad cold, and of the two alternatives Ethel preferred the former.

“It will clear up presently,” said Mrs. Jones, who never took a gloomy view of anything. She had several letters to write, and was going to be very busy. “And what

will you do, my dear?" she said. "The new box of books came from Mudie's yesterday."

But Ethel was in no humour for reading. A sudden idea struck her. "May I have the key of the attics?" she said. "You told me I might go up there any day, and I feel rather like taking a look round them this morning."

"By all means, my dear," Mrs. Jones said, ringing as she spoke. "And though I think it's a queer taste for you to like rummaging about up there in the cold when you might be sitting cosy here by the fire, I just want you to please yourself; and, after all, some of the things upstairs are well worth seeing.—Ask Mrs. Perry for the key of the attics," she said to the servant who came in answer to the bell.

Ethel, who had expected to be presented with a fat bunch, was a little surprised when the man returned with one big key only.

"It's only the door at the foot of the staircase leading to the attics that I keep locked," Mrs. Jones said, perceiving her astonishment. "A lot of locked-up rooms is dangerous in case of fire. Just shut them when you come away, my dear; that is all that is necessary. And you know where the staircase is—behind the green baize door at the north end of the passage."

Ethel found the green baize door without any difficulty, and opening it discovered another door, which, on being unlocked, revealed a long flight of winding stairs. She had a fancy to be as much alone in the attics as possible, where, surrounded by the things that had once belonged

to him, and which were now virtually hers, she might succeed in conjuring up a clear mental picture of the old grand-uncle who had had such an important influence on her life.

So she shut the two doors behind her, mounted the staircase, and opening another door at the top, found herself at the end of a long passage corresponding in every respect to the one below. Mrs. Jones might call these rooms attics, Ethel thought to herself, but they were all, in spite of their sloping roofs, good-sized, airy rooms. She had been prepared to find things in a state of confusion, but the utmost order and neatness reigned everywhere. There must have been twelve or fourteen rooms in all, so that there had been no need to pile up the furniture anyhow. It was all swathed in holland covers, and so arranged that, although the things were placed so as to take up as little room as possible, space enough had been left to allow of a housemaid moving freely about when she was engaged in dusting.

From room to room Ethel wandered, lifting the covers now and again to see what sort of furniture was hidden underneath. After all, she thought, Mrs. Jones had been right to banish those massive mahogany suites of furniture and those huge four-post bedsteads from her bright, gay rooms. They would have looked exceedingly out of place in the house as it was now.

Up here, wrapped in the silence that was only broken by the housemaid's weekly visit, or on some chance occasion like the present, they seemed to occupy their

fitting place. The echo of her own footsteps, as she went from room to room, was the only sound that broke the stillness; and presently an eerie feeling, rather pleasant than otherwise, stole over Ethel. It was like a visit to ghostland, and she almost wished that she could feel creepy and see ghosts. But none appeared, and tiring of wandering aimlessly from room to room, she sat down to rest for a few moments in one she had not previously visited.

It was at the far end of the passage, and was not only bigger, but was less crowded up with furniture than any of the other rooms. The four walls were draped with sheets; and curious to know what was behind them, Ethel drew aside the corner of one, and saw that long bookshelves, laden with heavy books, lined the wall from floor to ceiling. This room, then, evidently held the contents of Mr. Dunmayne's library; and as she realized that, Ethel glanced about her with fresh interest. Several big pieces of furniture were grouped together in the middle of the room, and throwing back the covers that concealed them, Ethel saw that they consisted of two or three chairs—one a huge armchair of red morocco leather, very much worn and faded—a big writing-table, a reading-stand, a pedestal table, and an old-fashioned reading-lamp. Everything was solid and old fashioned, and, truth to say, somewhat ugly. No wonder, Ethel thought, as sinking into the armchair she silently contemplated the little group of furniture that had stood huddled out of sight in this lonely attic for so many years—no wonder that none of

these things were wanted in the library as it now was, with its furniture upholstered in smart Russian leather, its electric light, white paint, and red walls. This shabby old furniture would have looked sadly clumsy and out of place there. Yet, though she could not but own that to herself, a feeling of regret for the poor, ugly, banished furniture came over her. It was, after all, part and parcel of the old house, and it was hard that it should have had to make way for new-comers. Did it, she wondered, feel itself aggrieved at the long exile to which it had been condemned, and was it looking forward with eager anticipation to the day when its rightful mistress should come into her own?

"You can't look forward to it as eagerly as I do," Ethel said in a half whisper. "For two years more you must stay up here, but after that you shall go down to your own library again."

Then smiling at her foolishness in talking to a lot of old furniture, Ethel leaned back in her chair, and let her eyes rove thoughtfully over the room. Take away the sheets that covered the bookcases, distribute the furniture properly about the room, and it was easy to conjure up the library as it had been in her uncle's days. She had an idea that he must have spent a great deal of time in his library. He must have been rather a solitary old man at the last, and have sat there alone day after day. Did he read much in those heavy old books that lined the walls, or did he sit and think about his past life?

Suddenly a sensation of awe stole over her. It was more than likely that it was in the very chair in which she now sat that he had died. Had not Mr. Hurst said that he had been found dead in his armchair in the library? She was probably, then, the first person who had occupied it since his death. Feeling almost as if she had been guilty of an act of sacrilege, certainly of irreverence, in seating herself so carelessly in a chair in which such a solemn event had occurred, Ethel was rising hastily from it, when a small brooch that fastened some lace at the back of her neck caught in one of the buttons of the chair, and slipping down, disappeared in the crevice between the seat and the back of the chair. She had turned in time to see it slide out of sight, and it was the work of a moment only to plunge her hand after it. Feeling about, she soon found it, and was in the act of drawing it out, when her fingers came in contact with something that felt like a folded piece of paper. It proved, when brought to light, to be a square envelope, faded and yellow with age. It bore no address, neither was there writing of any kind on it, but the flap was not fastened, and there was a folded piece of paper inside, which, unlike the envelope, contained writing.

For a moment Ethel held the letter in her hand, undecided as to what she ought to do. She might, of course, be wrong, but she did not doubt that the envelope contained a letter which had been written by her grand-uncle shortly before his death, perhaps on the very day of it

even. Death had probably overtaken him before he had had time to address the envelope, and it had slipped from his hand and lain hidden there all these years. Ought she to read it? She weighed the matter for a moment or two, gravely and deliberately, feeling no curiosity to penetrate the secrets of the dead, but actuated only by a desire to do what was right. Would it be more honourable to burn the letter unread? She endeavoured to put herself in her grand-uncle's place. If she had been feeling as weak and as ill as no doubt he had felt before he died, and yet had exerted herself to write a letter, either to some dear friend or upon some vital matter that she was conscious had been left neglected too long, would she like the letter, supposing it were lost for many years, to be found only to be burnt unread after all? No, she would not, especially if it were found after the lapse of all those years by the very person to whom she had left all her money, and who was, therefore, her most natural representative.

So Ethel made up her mind to read the letter. With careful fingers she drew the sheet of notepaper from its envelope, and unfolded it. The ink had faded to a dull, discoloured brown, but the handwriting, though small, was so remarkably clear and distinct that Ethel had no difficulty at all in reading every word. Before she began it, she turned to the signature, and found, as she expected, that it was that of her grand-uncle. She had also been right in her surmise that he had written it on the very day of his death, for it was dated January 13,

1885. And in her mind's eye there rose up a picture of the tablet in the church with that date engraved upon it.

"MY DEAR PENROSE [it began],—I wish you would run down here to-morrow, and stay over the night with me. I have definitely made up my mind to do what I have been considering for some time, and alter my will. My nephew Robert's only child is a girl, and it seems a pity that a girl should get the old place while there are boys to inherit. A year or two ago—nay, six months ago—I would have ridiculed the idea that I would ever leave Aylewood to a son of James; I was firmly set on keeping him and his heirs out for ever. But one grows more forgiving—or is it only more forgetful?—of past wrongs as one nears the end, and the fact that my nephew Edmund is James's son has ceased to prejudice me against him. Besides, he has a son, a fine, manly little fellow, and I shall entail the property upon him. As you know, I offered to make my nephew Laurence my heir some years ago, but he refused, saying he would never accept the place while his cousin Edmund or either of his sons was alive, and that failing children of my own I ought to leave it to James's descendants. I thought him absurdly quixotic at the time, and let the old will, made on the day of James's marriage, stand. But the more I think of it, the more pity it seems to let Aylewood go to a girl, who will marry and take it out of the hands of the Dunmaynes for ever. So Edmund must inherit, and after him his son. Make a draft of the will, and bring

it down with you to-morrow. I shall settle something upon Laurence and upon the little girl too. She shall have my mother's diamonds; they are valuable. Send a wire to say if you can come. My mind will not be at ease until everything is done as I desire.—Believe me, my dear Penrose, yours very sincerely,

“PHILIP DUNMAYNE.”

The sentences grew more abrupt as the letter drew to a close. The handwriting, too, became jerky and uneven, as though the hand that had penned them and the brain that directed them were alike tired of the strain of writing. A last effort had been made to put the letter into its envelope, and then, before it could be directed or even closed, unconsciousness had supervened, and the writer had passed away with his last purpose unfulfilled.

Ethel's face was very pale and startled as she slowly folded the letter and put it back in its envelope. It was so plain and clear that a child could have understood its meaning. Aylewood was gone from her for ever. That was her first conscious thought. She was no longer in the proud position of being heiress to a fine old place and ever so many thousands a year. They had all been swept away by the mere reading of a letter. For it never entered her head for one moment to dream of doing otherwise than surrendering everything at once to her cousins. She hardly understood the difference between a moral and a legal right, and it would have seemed to her as dishonest to have suppressed that letter as to have

kept a purse that she had picked up in the street. Besides, she was, in spite of her own bitter disappointment, in full accord with the opinion at which her grand-uncle had somewhat tardily arrived—namely, that it was not just that she should inherit over the heads of her cousins. Now that she knew the facts of the case, her sympathies were, like those of Sir Laurence, with the other side. But, oh ! it was hard on her. Down had fallen all the airy castles she had built for the future, and she sat among the ruins and cried as if her heart would break. Nobody, it seemed, wanted her ; Uncle Laurence had shut his doors against her, and her own doors were hers no longer.

It was easy to understand now why, when she had been taken to see them by her uncle, her cousins had received her so coldly and borne such a grudge against her. It was hardly to be expected that they could have brought themselves to like any one who had usurped their rights, however innocently. If she was to be pitied, so were they. For fourteen long years they had been kept out of their rightful position, and her cousin Edmund had died without knowing that Aylewood had been virtually his since his uncle's death.

It was selfish of her, Ethel thought, to sit there bemoaning her own loss, instead of going at once to them with the letter. Yet though she told herself that sternly, she felt that she must be allowed a little time to grow accustomed to the idea that Aylewood would never be hers. If only her cousins were nicer, she

thought regretfully, the pain of relinquishing everything to them would have been considerably lessened. Mrs. Dunmayne was not an attractive person—at any rate she had not appeared in any very attractive light to her young cousin; Margaret she scarcely knew; Joan she liked, it was true; but, after all, it was to Hugh that the old place would go. And whatever Hugh might be like now, as a boy she had found him distinctly disagreeable. It gave her no pleasure at all to think that it was the grave-looking boy who had looked so reprovingly at her when she flew into a passion with him and his sisters who would benefit by her act of restoration. But if it came to that, she would have found no actual pleasure in giving up Aylewood to any one she could have named. But duty was duty, and must be performed at any cost.

For two long hours she sat in the cold, silent attic, while time flew by her unheeded. Yet it seemed to her, when at last, with a deep, heavy sigh, she rose from the chair that had given up to her the secret that it had kept so long, that ages had passed since, little dreaming of the violent change that would be wrought in her life before she left them again, she had wandered through the attics.

At lunch she looked so pale, except for a red spot that burned on her cheeks, that Mrs. Jones gazed at her in alarm.

"I do hope, my dear," she said, "that you are not sickening for measles too."

Ethel started—her thoughts had been far away at the moment—and then shook her head emphatically.

"I!" she said. "Why, I am never ill—at least," remembering the attack of influenza that had laid her low in London, "hardly ever."

"For apart from the distress it would cause me if you got ill, it would be a dreadful responsibility for me," pursued Mrs. Jones. "And to tell you the truth, my dear, I have been thinking that I should be much easier in my mind if you would tell me the name of some relations or friends of yours that I could write to in case you did get ill or anything happened to you. Now, don't think I want to be poking and prying into your affairs, my dear. It's not that, but you must see for yourself that it would be a relief to my mind. You are not offended with me, are you?"

"Offended; no, indeed!" Ethel answered warmly. "Not many people would have taken me as you did, without even knowing my real name. It was rather silly, I think now, not to have used my own name; it was stupid and school-girlish to have made a mystery about myself, and where I came from. But if you don't mind waiting until this evening, Mrs. Jones, I will tell you everything about myself then."

"When you like, I am sure, my dear," Mrs. Jones said hastily. "And remember this, my dear, it is not out of curiosity or because I distrust you in any way that I am asking. It's only in case, as I said before, of not knowing where to write to, if you were to get ill."

Ethel nodded thoughtfully. A few weeks ago she would have dismissed with airy impatience the mere notion that she could get ill; but she was learning to look at things from two points of view now, and if Mrs. Jones was uneasy at not knowing her real name, she had a right to be told it. But with the thought of the coming interview with her cousins before her, she was unwilling just then to face the surprise Mrs. Jones would naturally feel when her identity was disclosed. And that was why she put off the explanation until the evening.

"You mark my words," Mrs. Jones said presently; "you'll live to be sorry yet, my dear, that you misjudged your uncle so. No man would be so harsh and unforgiving to a niece whom he had cared for all his life as you say your uncle cared for you."

Though Ethel would have been considerably surprised had she known it, Mrs. Jones, whom she thought unobservant and not particularly clever, had formed a very just estimate of her character during the weeks they had lived together. And the liking which Mrs. Jones had conceived for her the first moment she saw her had deepened as she got to know her better. She had a sincere admiration for Ethel's straightforward, truthful nature, and for the plucky way in which she fought the sad thoughts which, Mrs. Jones could see, frequently assailed her. She knew that Ethel's faults lay chiefly on the surface, and perceived that the very pride which was so salient a point of her nature would prevent her from ever stooping to the slightest act of deception. And

from the depths of her kindly heart Mrs. Jones deplored the misunderstanding that had arisen between Ethel and this uncle, who, in spite of the careless nothing-matters-much air with which she shrugged her shoulders at her own thoughts afterwards, she was shrewd enough to see was constantly in the girl's mind.

"You said that only one of the two letters you wrote him you posted yourself," Mrs. Jones went on. "The first you gave to a little newspaper boy. Well, my dear, the chances are ten to one that he just tore off the stamp and threw the letter away. So that leaves only the second letter, and that one may never have got to him either; and all these weeks he may be just hunting and hunting for you, and be as unhappy as possible about you."

"But even supposing he never got my letters," Ethel answered, "it would still have been the easiest thing in the world for him to have traced me. Oh, do you think that I have not argued it out for myself again and again, and looked at it in every possible light? And I know that if my uncle had wanted to find me, he could have done so."

Her tone was final, even a little impatient. Mrs. Jones was very good and kind, it seemed to say, but it was hardly probable that her conclusions on the matter were as correct as Ethel's own. Besides, it went against her grain to discuss her uncle with any one, even with kind Mrs. Jones.

Yet, as she walked down the village that afternoon,

it was not of the coming interview with her cousins that she thought, nor yet of the momentous piece of news that she was about to tell them. Instead, her thoughts dwelt on the conversation she had just had with Mrs. Jones. Could it be possible, after all, that she had been misjudging her uncle during all these long, long weeks, and that he had never received either of her two letters? Oh, if only she could believe that he was not angry with her still, how happy she would feel! Why, the loss of Aylewood was nothing with what she had suffered in feeling that she had lost her uncle's affections. If she had only walked into the study that night, and told him that he was mistaken in supposing that she was a thief, what a lot of unhappiness she might have spared herself. Had she the time over again, no false pride should stand in her way. She would have made him believe in her complete innocence. And yet she had written explaining everything to him afterwards. No, looking at the matter from every possible standpoint, the theory that her uncle refused to forgive her was the only one she could entertain. He must have got her letter; if he had not, he would have been in ignorance all this while of her whereabouts. And he would scarcely have remained so entirely passive and indifferent to her fate if the mere fact whether she was alive or not had been in doubt.

It was not until she had pulled the long-handled bell belonging to her cousin's house that she dismissed the train of thought with which she had been busy during her walk, and remembered the errand on which she had come.

Chapter XVI.

COUSINS.

TRESS opened the door to her with the same air of protest that he had worn on the occasion of her previous visit.

"Yes, miss, Mrs. Dunmayne is in," he said. "But she is not receiving callers this afternoon."

"I haven't come to pay a call. I have come to see Mrs. Dunmayne on business," Ethel answered. "Will you tell her, please? and ask her if she will be kind enough to see me."

"If you will step inside, miss, I will give her your message," Tress said, in a grudging tone.

He took a positive delight, Joan told Ethel afterwards in later days, when the cousins got to know each other better, in denying them to visitors, and often, in fact, exceeded Mrs. Dunmayne's orders in that respect. He ushered her now into the same room into which she had been shown the day before, and paused for a moment on the threshold.

"Wouldn't Miss Dunmayne or Miss Margaret do?" he asked, hoping perhaps that she would answer in the affirmative, and that he would then be spared the

necessity of admitting to her that his mistress would see her after all.

"No," Ethel answered, "I must see Mrs. Dunmayne herself."

Tress withdrew then, muttering to himself, and Ethel sat down on the nearest chair and stared thoughtfully in front of her. She hoped that Mrs. Dunmayne would be induced to see her that afternoon; since Aylewood had to be relinquished, she would like to get the matter over and done with as soon as possible.

Tress had left the door ajar, and Ethel heard him cross the passage to the room from whence Mrs. Dunmayne's voice had issued on the previous day, and announce that Miss Dunn had called. As he opened the door, a sound of mingled talk and laughter reached Ethel's ears; but it ceased as Tress made his announcement, and Mrs. Dunmayne's rather querulous voice floated distinctly across the passage.

"What, again!" she exclaimed. "This is the third time within two days that Miss Dunn has called."

"Her visit yesterday afternoon could hardly have been considered a call, mother," Joan said, with some amusement in her tone. "Our callers don't generally jump the river when they come to call on us."

"That was a pretty good jump for a girl," said a voice which had been laughing the loudest a moment ago, and which, Ethel supposed, must belong to her cousin Hugh. She had forgotten for the moment that he was at home. "Hadn't you better ask her to come in here, mother?"

The drawing-room is rather cold for you to sit in for any time. Besides, if you ask her to come in here, I shall have a chance of seeing her, and I should like to have a look at the young lady who can jump the Ayle."

"In here! Oh, bother!" said another voice, taking part in the discussion for the first time. "And I am not fit to be seen; my hair is so dreadfully untidy."

"You shouldn't go to sleep in armchairs over the fire, then," retorted her brother. "Now then, Tress, ask the lady if she will be kind enough to come in here."

"I hope she won't stay very long," sighed Mrs. Dunmayne.

At any other time Ethel would have been moved to laughter at the recollection of the discussion that had preceded her admission; but her mind was so full of what she had to say, that when Tress ushered her, with all due formality, into the presence of her cousins, she came forward without a smile on her face.

Joan was the first to greet her.

"How do you do, Miss Dunn?" she said. "We ought to apologize for asking you to come into our untidy snuggerly; but you said you particularly wanted to see mother, and the drawing-room is too cold for her in this weather. This is my brother, Captain Dunmayne," she added. "You have not met him before."

"Oh yes, I have," Ethel said, glancing at her cousin. But she would not have known him again. The boy of her previous recollection had grown into a man of seven or eight and twenty, tall, fair, and broad shouldered

with merry blue eyes that looked in a friendly way at her as she shook hands with him. The thought passed through her mind that this cousin of hers did not appear so very disagreeable after all.

"But I don't think you can have seen him before," Joan said in some surprise. "Hugh only came down yesterday, and he hasn't been here since you have been living with Mrs. Jones."

"Oh, it was a long time ago," Ethel said; "nearly fourteen years ago. I came down here for the day, and was introduced to all of you. We didn't get on a bit. Hugh shook me and put me in a corner; Margaret called me a hateful child; and you, Joan, I don't know what you did. Contented yourself with taking no notice of me, I think."

Long before Ethel had finished this speech, an expression of blank bewilderment and amazement was imprinted on the faces of her four hearers. Ethel's habit of saying things very much as they came into her head had caused her, quite against her will, to astonish them at the very outset. Though she had rehearsed no set speech in which to break the important news to them, and had not even arranged in her mind how she was to open the subject, she had not intended to blurt it out in any sensational way.

"I think you are making some mistake, Miss Dunn," Mrs. Dunmayne said in her frigid tones, before any of the others could speak. "Neither my son, Captain Dunmayne, nor my daughters have seen you before. Neither

have I any recollection of your name. But there is no need to take up your time by discussing this matter further. My servant said you wished to see me on business. I am quite at your disposal."

Mrs. Dunmayne's most pointed snubs seemed destined to be utterly lost upon Ethel. While Hugh, who was standing on the hearthrug, looked displeased at his mother's severity, and Joan flushed uncomfortably, Ethel only nodded her head in acquiescence.

"Very well," she said gravely. "I was beginning at the wrong end, but it doesn't matter. When you know who I really am, you will see that I was not making any mistake."

"Would you rather see my mother alone, Miss Dunn?" Hugh asked. "We three can leave you to yourselves if you would rather we did so."

Margaret rose to her feet immediately. As she said afterwards, the interview had opened in such an exceedingly unpromising manner that she wanted to make good her escape before worse followed.

"Yes, perhaps it would be as well," Mrs. Dunmayne was beginning, when Ethel interrupted her.

"No, I want you all to stay, please," she said quickly. "What I am going to tell you concerns you all."

A flush rose to Mrs. Dunmayne's thin face. Contradiction annoyed her excessively, and within the space of as many minutes Ethel had been twice guilty of that offence.

"I really cannot imagine what it is you have to say

on the subject of our concerns, Miss Dunn," she remarked.

"Perhaps if we give Miss Dunn a fair hearing she will tell us," Hugh said. He had been watching Ethel gravely during the last few minutes, and he could see that it was on no trifling matter, to her at all events, on which she had come.

"I am quite ready to listen to what Miss Dunn has to say," Mrs. Dunmayne said, rather pointedly, in the short silence that succeeded her son's remark.

"I am not quite sure if I know how to begin," Ethel said in a slow, thoughtful tone, looking absently from one to the other of the faces that were turned expectantly towards her. Though any such artifice was far from her mind, she could scarcely have adopted a manner more calculated to stir the interest of her hearers. It was plain now even to Mrs. Dunmayne that Ethel was so thoroughly impregnated with the seriousness of what she had to say as to be absolutely impervious to all other considerations. "But perhaps," she added, "I had better tell you first that my name is not Dunn, but Dunmayne. I am your cousin, Ethel Dunmayne."

An electric shock seemed to pass simultaneously from one to the other of her hearers.

"What!" ejaculated Mrs. Dunmayne, starting into an upright position and gazing incredulously at Ethel.

"Impossible!" Joan and Margaret exclaimed together.

Hugh was the first to master his strong surprise. "Do

you really mean," he said, "that you are actually Ethel Dunmayne?"

"Yes," she answered, puzzled at the excitement with which her news had been received. It was by far the least important part of what she had to say, and though it was of course natural that they should be surprised at her announcement, she had not expected that it would give rise to such unbounded wonder and incredulity.

"Then why," Hugh asked, a rising note of indignation in his voice, "have you kept Cousin Laurence in ignorance about your safety all this time?"

"Oh," said Ethel, somewhat taken aback at being brought to book in this way, "you know all about that, then! But Uncle Laurence is not anxious about me. I wrote to him twice, but he won't forgive me."

"We are awfully at cross purposes," Hugh said. "Let—"

Joan interrupted him. "Then you are not dead, after all!" she exclaimed.

"Dead!" Ethel said in a puzzled tone; "why, of course not. Who thought I was? I remember now old Mr. Hurst said something about that the other day, but I don't know why he, or you—"

"But surely," Joan cried out, "if you really are Ethel Dunmayne, you must know about the awful accident—"

"The dreadful fire," Margaret said with a shudder. "How did you escape?"

"I don't know what you are talking about!" Ethel exclaimed. "What awful accident? What awful fire?"

Then Hugh broke in again. "Don't you really know?" he said. "Haven't you come down to tell us how you escaped?"

"No, I have not," Ethel said, looking from one to the other of her cousins with an expression that seemed to suggest that they had one and all recently escaped from a lunatic asylum. "I came to tell you something quite different; but if you will all interrupt in such a maddening way I shall never get it told."

"But," Margaret was beginning in an excited tone, when Hugh, taking a step forward, placed himself in front of his sister.

"Look here," he said, "we shall never get to the bottom of this if we keep on interrupting each other so. "Now," addressing Ethel, "if you will tell us what you came to tell us about ourselves, we will tell you something about yourself afterwards."

Joan and Margaret looked only half satisfied with that arrangement. It was evident that they were labouring under excitement, which became all the stronger now that it had to be suppressed, and they threw themselves back on their chairs to listen to her with an impatience that they did not attempt to conceal. As for Mrs. Dunmayne, who had taken no part at all in the quick interchange of cross questions and crooked answers that had gone on around her, she merely sat and looked at Ethel in a strange, stunned way.

Ethel nodded in response to Hugh's suggestion. "Yes, that will be best," she said. "Well, of course," she began,

"now that you know who I am, you will know that I have always looked upon myself as the future owner of Aylewood. It was natural that I should think so," she added almost apologetically, "and it was only this morning that I found out what a mistake I had been making. I thought, you know, that I had the best right to it, for it was not until yesterday afternoon that I even knew that my grandfather was younger than your grandfather."

"Ten years younger," Mrs. Dunmayne said, in such a mechanical way that it was scarcely an interruption.

"Yes," Ethel said, with one of her grave little nods. "I saw it on the tombstone in the church. That was why you called the will an iniquitous one. I thought then that it was perhaps a little hard on you, but it seemed to me that a man had, after all, the best right to leave his money to the brother he liked most."

"He hardly knew Charles," Mrs. Dunmayne broke out with sudden unexpected energy. "It was not love for him, but spite against his other brother that caused him to act as he did. Philip hated him, and bore him a grudge for nearly forty years."

"But he forgave him at the last," Ethel cried. The bitterness in Mrs. Dunmayne's tone jarred upon her. Her sympathies were with the lonely old man who had striven to put things right at the last, and she was ready to stand up in his defence. "He said so in the letter in which he left Aylewood to you all instead of to me. In the new will everything was to come to you."

"The new will! What do you mean? Has a new

will been found after all these years?" Mrs. Dunmayne almost shrieked. A red spot burned on each of her cheeks, as with her hands clasped tight in sudden agitation she leaned forward, her eyes fixed eagerly on Ethel.

Now Ethel had not anticipated any pleasure in the mere telling of her tale; yet it was only natural that, having reached the most exciting point in it, she should wish to finish it in her own way, and so, disregarding Mrs. Dunmayne's question, she proceeded to recount her morning's adventure exactly as it had happened.

She told them how she had gone up to the attics, and how, interested in the sight of the furniture that had evidently belonged to Mr. Philip Dunmayne's library stored away there, she had examined it closely, and had even sat down in the very chair in which she had reason to believe he had died.

"And you found the will in his desk?" Margaret said, with a little gasp. She was to the full as excited now as her mother and Joan. Hugh alone of them all retained his calmness, as with close attention he followed every word his cousin uttered.

"No, it was in his chair I found it," Ethel answered. "My brooch slipped down into the crevice between the seat and the back, and while I was feeling for it my fingers touched something else, and I drew out this," she added, putting her hand into the loose pocket of her coat and taking out the letter in its original envelope.

"Hugh, Hugh, do you hear?" his mother cried with a

little gasp. "Oh, give it to me," she added, turning almost eagerly upon Ethel; "I want to see it."

Ethel held out the precious document, and Mrs. Dunmayne almost snatched it from her grasp. She scanned it eagerly, and then with a sudden bitter little cry she flung it from her.

"You are playing with us," she cried. "This is no will; it is only a letter."

"Yes, I know," Ethel answered, picking it up. "But read what it says.—You read it aloud, Hugh," she said, handing it to him, "and then Cousin Alice will understand."

Hugh took it and did as she asked; and though in the revulsion of her feeling it was doubtful if Mrs. Dunmayne heard a word of it, the two girls listened with eager, parted lips.

"There," Ethel said with a little sigh when her cousin had finished, "that makes it pretty plain, I think. Aylewood isn't mine any longer, but yours."

Hugh gave her a keen, searching look. "Do you really mean to say," he asked, "that you think this," and he tapped the letter he held, "gives Aylewood to us?"

"Why, yes," Ethel said. "Don't you understand that that was what he meant? It is as plain as anything. 'It seems a pity,' he writes, 'that a girl'—that's me—'should get the place when there's a boy'—and that's you—to inherit.' And so he changed his mind and left it you after all."

"That was what he meant—yes," Hugh said. "But the point is that he did not live to carry out his intentions.

And Aylewood is as much yours to-day as it was yesterday."

"And that letter," said Mrs. Dunmayne, "is not worth the paper it is written on. We could not go to law on such evidence as that. It is absolutely of no value whatever. That will never give Aylewood back to us."

She spoke in such a bitter tone that Ethel gazed at her in perplexity. Then light suddenly broke in upon her mind, and she saw the point of view from which her cousin Alice was looking at the matter.

"Oh, but do you think that I should dare to keep Aylewood after reading this letter!" she exclaimed with an indignant flash in her eyes. "Why, I should be no better than a thief if I did. How could I, when I know that Grand-uncle Philip did not want me to have it! It is bad enough to think that I have kept you out all these years, but that was not my fault. But how could you think that I would be such a mean, miserable wretch as to keep it for myself now, simply because he did not live to make another will? Would you take advantage of a little thing like that, Hugh?" she said, turning almost angrily upon him.

"No, he would not," Joan answered before her brother could speak.

"Well, then, why should you think that what is not honourable for a man to do does not matter for a girl?" Ethel asked him. "Tell me that."

Hugh's blue eyes twinkled in a way that reminded Ethel of Sir Laurence. "It was on a question of honour

that we had our last fight," he said. "We had better avoid the subject altogether if we wish to keep the peace, hadn't we?"

"Oh, but you shan't get out of answering my question in that way," Ethel replied. "Tell me, haven't you always thought that your father had a better right to Aylewood than mine?"

"Yes," Hugh admitted reluctantly; "since you insist on knowing, I may say that I have always thought he had."

"Well, then," Ethel pursued triumphantly, "now that you know that Grand-uncle Philip wished him to have it at the last, can you say that I'm not doing the only right thing in giving the place back to you here and now?"

"Certainly I can," was Hugh's unexpected answer. "How can we be sure, in the first place, that the wish expressed in that letter was his last wish? He may have changed his mind again before he died."

"Hardly," Ethel answered. "The letter was written on the day of his death. Look at the date."

"Well, in the second place, then, it is a serious matter to set a will aside in the haphazard fashion you suggest. A big property cannot be shifted from one person to another in the uncereemonious way in which one gives, say, a sixpenny piece to a beggar."

"Oh, you mean that there would have to be lawyers and people," Ethel said, dismissing that objection also with an air that said as plainly as words could have done that his arguments had no weight whatever with her.

"There is another," Hugh said gravely, but with the

suspicion of a smile dawning in his eyes, "and a very strong reason why you cannot give up Aylewood to us 'here and now,' as you expressed it. For, my dear Ethel, it is not yours to give—not for another three years. You are still a minor, and have no more say in the disposition of your own property at present than, say, Margaret has."

Ethel received this information with a sense of disappointment so keen that it kept her silent for a moment. Then remembering the smile in Hugh's eyes, it suddenly struck her that, knowing that she had no power to give Aylewood away, he had been laughing at her all throughout.

"Then I have been making myself supremely ridiculous," she said, her tone unconsciously betraying the hurt she had received.

"Ridiculous!" Hugh cried, while the laughter died out of his eyes and gave place to an expression of admiration. "I think you are one of the noblest girls I ever heard of. It was an honourable, generous thing to propose, Ethel, and I know you meant every word you said."

"And mean it still," Ethel answered quietly, but with a look on her face that spoke more forcibly of her determination to relinquish Aylewood in favour of her cousins as soon as ever she had the power to do so than if she had announced her intentions over and over again. "But don't, for goodness' sake, go on calling me honourable and noble. It's only common honesty not to keep what does not belong to one."

"I think you are one of the straightest girls that I have ever heard of," Joan said, suddenly getting up and

kissing Ethel; "and I hope I should have been as honourable as you are if I had been in your place, but I am afraid, I am very much afraid, that I should not. Anyhow it would have been an awful struggle to me to give up Aylewood, and I should have let people see that I was very conscious of behaving nobly, and not have talked about common honesty, and doing the right thing."

"And as for me," Margaret said, following her sister's example, and kissing her cousin, "I am perfectly certain that I could not have parted with Aylewood had it been mine. But that does not prevent me from admiring you with all my heart."

"Kiss me too, dear," Mrs. Dunmayne said suddenly, and as Ethel stooped to obey her she took both her hands in her own cold ones. "Ah," she said, looking searchingly into Ethel's face, "will you, I wonder, be in the same mind two years hence, or will riches and power have become so sweet to you that you will no longer wish to do justice to us? What a pity—ah, what a pity it is that you are not of age now!"

"Come, mother," Hugh said, "I won't have you extracting any secret pledges for the future from Ethel. We have all told her what we think of her generous action to-day, and let that be sufficient for the present."

"Ah, but I like what Cousin Alice says best," Ethel said with brightening eyes. "She calls things by their proper names, and she knows that I don't deserve any praise for what I have said to-day, but that, on the other hand, if I don't carry it out I shall deserve any amount of contempt.

I know now that Uncle Laurence thought I never ought to have had Aylewood, and I believe he must have hoped that when I came of age I would give it up to you, and for that reason he never encouraged me in any of my expensive tastes."

"Had you expensive tastes?" Hugh queried, with a smile; "and what were they?"

"Oh, only about horses," Ethel answered. "I wanted a stableful, but I see now why Uncle Laurence always threw cold water on my wishes in that respect."

"Oh, your Uncle Laurence is an upright, honourable man," Mrs. Dunmayne said in a tone of satisfaction. "You cannot do better than be guided by him. And that reminds me that you ought to lose no time in putting an end to the great grief he is feeling on your account. And tell him that you were not burnt in the theatre that night, after all; though how you escaped is a mystery that I should like to hear explained. It was burnt to the ground on the night of the twenty-second of January, and two hundred persons perished in the flames."

"Barnstow theatre burnt!" Ethel exclaimed in startled, incredulous tones, turning a face from which the shock of the news had driven every vestige of colour towards Mrs. Dunmayne. "When was it burnt? This is the first I have heard of it. On the twenty-second of January, you say. Why, that was the night I was to have gone there. Oh, what about Ida—my friend Ida Green!—was she saved, do you know?"

"Yes, your friend was among the rescued," Hugh inter-

posed quickly. "I happen to know, for I saw Cousin Laurence in town the other day, and he spoke to me of her. She escaped by the stage entrance before the fire took the hold on the building that it afterwards did. But she was badly injured, and she had some injury to her head, I think; and she has had brain fever, and has not recognized any one since. The people in the stalls were the worst sufferers, and ever so many of them were suffocated by the smoke before the fire reached them."

"But why should people think I was there?" Ethel said, more as though she were speaking to herself. "I might have been, of course, but I never went near Barnstown. I went straight up to London that night, and I wrote to Uncle Laurie the next night."

She stopped short, and suddenly sprang to her feet.

"What was that you said, Cousin Alice, about Uncle Laurence thinking I was dead all this time? Oh no, oh no! no, no, don't say that he has been thinking that all this time. Oh, what a wretch I have been to make him so miserable about me all these long, long weeks! But I never knew."

It was in vain that her cousins united in an endeavour to pacify her. Severely as they had been inclined to blame her when they thought that she wilfully left her uncle in ignorance of her safety, their displeasure evaporated when they saw that she knew absolutely nothing of what was supposed to have happened to her.

"And you did write twice, you know," Margaret reminded her.

"Oh, I ought to have written a dozen times!" Ethel cried rather wildly. "Or rather I ought never to have gone away like that. But why am I losing time now like this? I shall telegraph immediately that it was all a mistake, and that I am not dead, and I shall go home at once."

And though Mrs. Dunmayne was inclined to expostulate at the idea of any one starting off on such a long journey at such short notice, her three younger cousins backed her up in the idea. Joan was already consulting a time-table.

"If you catch the 4.30 from here," she said—and with a glance at the clock, "you can just do it if you hurry—you will get up to Victoria at 5.40. That will give you heaps of time to catch the 6.30 at Paddington, and will bring you to Torleigh at 11.19."

"And I will see you safely across London," Hugh added. He rang the bell, and sent Tress for a cab.

"But your luggage and Mrs. Jones?" Mrs. Dunmayne protested feebly. The question of luggage Ethel dismissed as not worthy of serious attention, but Mrs. Jones deserved more consideration.

"I will go up and explain everything to her if you like," Joan volunteered; "and when I have told her all your story—for, of course, I must do that—she will not be in the least offended at being treated in such an unceremonious fashion."

"She knows already that Dunn is not my real name," Ethel said. "I told her that when she engaged me, so it won't be such a surprise to her as it might otherwise have been."

"Listen," said Hugh, who had been busily scribbling on a piece of paper; "how will this do for a telegram, do you think? The worst of it is that one can't break news gently in a telegram. It must come as something of a shock. So the only thing is to send a fairly long one. 'All a mistake about Ethel. She never went to Barnstow. Is alive and well. Has been living at Aylewood with Mrs. Jones. Is coming home to-night by the train arriving at Torleigh at 11.19.'"

"It doesn't say quite enough," Ethel said, taking the pencil from his hand, "for it doesn't tell him why I ran away; and unless he knows that, he won't be able to believe that it isn't all a hoax. This would be better: 'All a mistake about Ethel. She is alive and well. She missed her train from Newton and came back to Nutcombe. Overheard your conversation with Violet about the missing notes. Left home in a temper. Became a governess at Aylewood with Mrs. Jones. Only heard to-day that you believed her dead. Is coming home to-night by the train arriving Torleigh 11.19.'"

And so the news of Ethel's safety and immediate return home was flashed in that form over the wires, while Ethel herself travelled as fast as an express train could take her from the south to the west of England. Hugh escorted her as far as Paddington; but though she was grateful to him for the way he looked after her, she scarcely spoke to him at all. Her conscience was upbraiding her so for the unnecessary pain and grief she had caused her uncle that she felt quite weighed down

under its reproaches. If he had judged her wrongfully, she had done the same by him. Why was it that everybody seemed to have known him better than she had? Mrs. Rogers, the lady manageress of the registry office, Mrs. Jones, even little Kate Murphy, had all told her that it was impossible that an uncle who had been so good to her all his life should prove so unkind as she had thought him.

But she had listened to none of them. And the silence which she had misconstrued into a desire to have nothing more to do with her had been due, after all, to a belief that she had perished in that awful fire. She could easily understand now how it had been so easily taken for granted that she had been one of the victims of that catastrophe. No one knew that she had come home and gone out again so quickly that evening. Every one supposed that she had carried out the intention she had expressed when she left home directly after lunch, and had travelled straight from Frimly to Barnstow without coming back to Nutcombe at all. Even if Ida had been well enough since to tell Sir Laurence that she had not seen his niece there, it would prove nothing; for both girls had been aware beforehand that she could not reach the theatre in time to see her friend before the piece began, but was to go straight to the seat in the stalls, a ticket for which Ida had sent her. It was strange, Ethel thought, that she had seen no mention of the catastrophe in any newspaper; but presently she remembered that one that must have contained a full account of it had actually been

offered to her—"Litest detiles of the 'orrible fire." Like a flash the dirty face and Cockney accent of the little boy to whom she had given her letter to post came back to her mind. How differently things would have turned out if she had bought a paper! The next day, of course, she had taken ill, and days passed before she had had another chance of seeing a newspaper.

That her uncle had never received either of the two letters she had written him she was now forced to believe. Hugh was so positive on that point that she was obliged to accept his word for it. That the first letter had gone astray she could easily understand now. Of course the small boy had torn it up for the sake of stealing the stamp. If he had only posted the letter she felt that she would not have grudged him the stamp. But the fate of the second was a mystery. And a mystery it remained for many months to come; and then one day, dirty and soiled and covered with all sorts of strange postmarks, a battered envelope was handed with his other letters to Sir Laurence. And after staring at it and examining it for some minutes, he brought it with a smile to Ethel.

"See, Ethel," he said, "the lost letter has turned up at last. No wonder it has been some time on its way, for you directed it to New Zealand—'Nutcombe Hall, Torleigh, New Zealand.' Now what could have made you do that?"

"I know," Ethel cried out, after a moment's puzzled silence. "I was thinking of New Zealand as I directed the envelope. I had seen an advertisement for an English



She jumped from the carriage almost into her uncle's arms.



governess wanted by a lady living in New Zealand, and I thought if you wouldn't have me back I would apply for the post. But it was awfully stupid and careless of me. I suppose I was in such a hurry to get the letter posted that I never looked at the address once I had written it."

It was a saddened and chastened Ethel that made the long journey from Paddington to Torleigh that evening. Her own thoughts and the feeble lighting of the carriage she occupied alone combined to make it impossible for her to read any of the magazines and papers with which her cousin had provided her, and the hours passed with tantalizing slowness. Then she began to torment herself with questions as to how her uncle would receive her. Would his manner be cold and severe, or would it merely be sad and grave? That he could be at first just the dear Uncle Laurence she had always known, the closest and best friend she had ever had, she dared not believe. And yet when, after a long, tedious wait at Newton, the train started on again, and in due course rushed with a shriek and a whistle into the little station of Torleigh, and, in the dim light cast by the oil lamps that lit the platform, she saw him standing waiting for her, all doubts and fears about her reception, as well as the humbly apologetic speech she had prepared, were alike forgotten, and regardless of the Great Western Railway's rules and penalties anent persons alighting from trains before they stopped, she burst open the door and jumped from the carriage almost into his arms. And then she forgot to remark

whether his manner was cold and severe, or merely sad and grave. She only knew that his arms were holding her close, and that if she was crying—why she should have cried at that moment she did not know—his eyes were not dry either.

Chapter XVII.

CONCLUSION.

IT was the morning of the next day, and Ethel sat in Sir Laurence's study. Sir Laurence, who disapproved of late hours for young people, never liked to be reminded of the hour to which he had permitted her to sit up the previous evening; but Ethel always declared afterwards that the birds had begun their morning concert before she laid her head on her pillow. And how glad and grateful she was at finding herself once more in the home she had so recklessly quitted she alone knew. Though it was close upon midnight before she reached Nutcombe, the entire household had sat up to welcome her. Nothing less than the actual sight of Miss Ethel, they all declared, would convince them that she was actually alive after all. And the joy and gladness which everybody manifested at her safe return made her realize as perhaps nothing else could have done the sorrow and gloom into which the house had been plunged on her account; and she felt sorry and ashamed to think that she should, however unwittingly, have let every one remain so long under the impression that she had met her death in so terrible a fashion.

Her aunt and cousin were away, Sir Laurence had

told her during that long, memorable drive from the station, in which they had had so much to say to one another, so much to ask and to answer, that the wheels were scrunching on the gravel of the drive before they realized that they were clear of the town.

Violet was truly repentant of the wrong she had done her cousin, and while they were upon the subject Sir Laurence gave Ethel a brief account of the events that had led Violet to take his money.

"So it was done for Wilfrid's sake," he concluded; "and Wilfrid, who it appears had never any other intention but to make full confession to Mr. Nugent, sent the money back the next day, and urged Violet not only to give the money back to me at once, but to tell me why she had taken it. The poor boy guessed from her letter, I suppose, that the methods by which she had obtained the money were not altogether honourable ones, and it added tenfold to the shame he already felt on his own account to think that he had led his sister astray also. Poor child, she needed no urging to confess to me that her insinuations against you were untrue. The news of your supposed death came, as you may imagine, as a terrible shock to her, and the reflection that while death was so close to you she had been allowing undeserved reproach to rest on your name preyed dreadfully on her mind, and I think it would be no exaggeration to say that she has not known a single happy moment since. She and Wilfrid are in rooms quite close to the nursing home in which their mother is staying at present."

"Aunt Isabel in a nursing home!" Ethel exclaimed. "Is anything the matter with her?"

"There has been something very serious the matter with her for many months," Sir Laurence replied. "And in a few days' time she is to undergo a very grave operation indeed. If it is successful, as we trust it will be, she may be spared for a great many years, and be stronger and better than she has been in the past. But to undergo it is her only chance of life."

"Oh, poor Aunt Isabel!" Ethel said in awed tones. "Does she know what danger she is in?"

"She has known it for many months past," Sir Laurence answered, "and I have known it too. But she would not allow me to tell any of you young people. She had a horror of making you feel sad on her account, and she preferred to bear the pain she suffered uncomplainingly."

"Oh, poor Aunt Isabel!" Ethel said again. "And I never knew she was really ill, but used to think that she liked being a sort of semi-invalid. Oh, what a horrid, heartless wretch she must have thought me!"

"Indeed she did nothing of the kind," Sir Laurence answered. "She did not expect you to sympathize with illness of which you were ignorant."

"Oh, but I might have been nicer," Ethel answered, as her memory, relentlessly accurate, brought back to her mind many occasions on which she might, as she herself expressed it, have been "nicer" to her aunt. "I should like to go up to see her before she has the operation, if I may, Uncle Laurence," she added.

"You shall, my dear," he promised her. "I am only down here for a few days, and I will take you up with me when I return."

The news that Miss Dunmayne had not been burnt after all spread rapidly throughout the neighbourhood, and there were, much to her disgust, paragraphs in the local newspapers about her.

"A headstrong, troublesome girl," was the verdict pretty generally passed upon her by people who only knew her by sight or by hearsay; but her own friends were so overjoyed that she had been spared the dreadful fate which had been supposed to have overtaken her that they could not find it in their hearts to censure her very severely.

It never occurred to Ethel to try and fasten any of the blame of what had happened upon her cousin Violet. Yet if it was true that she left home because her uncle had suspected her unjustly, it was equally true that Violet, the really guilty person, had by her silence done her best to deepen that suspicion; and for once Violet was more than ready to accept her share of the blame.

Sir Laurence had telegraphed the news of their cousin's safety to Violet and Wilfrid as soon as he was assured of it himself, and the next day a long, incoherent letter of apology and contrition came from Violet. And even as Ethel read it, the feeling of contempt and anger she had entertained for her cousin died away, and she forgave her as fully and freely as her uncle had forgiven her.

But all the congratulations she was destined to receive

on her own safety could not keep Ethel's mind from dwelling on her friend Ida, and she easily induced Sir Laurence to take her over to Barnstown to see her.

"She will not know you," he warned her, as they drove from the station to the hospital in which the poor girl lay. "Your name was constantly on her lips during her delirium, and your death preys terribly on her mind."

But though Ethel had been thus prepared to see a great change in her friend, she was horrified to find what havoc the shock and subsequent brain fever had wrought in her. Her pretty, thick hair had been cut close to her head, her face was worn to a mere shadow, and her eyes, once so alive with intelligence, had now only a vacant, weary look in them.

"No, she won't know you," said Mrs. Green, who had come to Barnstown, and taken rooms near the hospital in order to be as much with her step-daughter as possible. "As you see her now, so she is always, gentle and uncomplaining, but with her mind a perfect blank. At times a look of horror, as though she recalls the awful events of that night, comes into her eyes, and she cries out to you to go away; but in general she lies there quite quiet and apathetic. But the doctors all say that before she can really progress towards recovery, her mind must begin to work."

Ethel stooped over the bed and kissed her friend. "Ida," she said, in a voice that was choking with tears, "don't you know me—Ethel Dunmayne?"

Ida made a movement as though she would have

shaken her head. "Ethel is dead," she said in low, weak tones. "She died in the theatre that night. She came to see me act."

Mrs. Green uttered a quick but carefully suppressed exclamation. She would have prevented Ethel from speaking again, but the mischief, if mischief it was to prove, was done before she could interpose.

"Yes, but she didn't come," Ethel said, holding Ida's tired eyes with her own bright ones. "She missed her train, and never got to the theatre at all, and so she escaped that dreadful fire. Look at me—I am Ethel. Surely you know your old chum Ethel!"

Ethel was kneeling beside the bed now, holding Ida's thin white hands in hers. There was a breathless silence, during which the doctor, who had given them permission to see Ida, came into the room. Slowly, slowly the vacant look cleared out of Ida's eyes, and a puzzled expression crept into them.

"Are you really Ethel?" she said wonderingly.

"Yes, really and truly," was the prompt reply. "I missed my train, and never reached the theatre at all."

There was another pause of anxious expectancy on the part of all present.

"I am so glad, so glad," came at length from the scarcely parted lips. "Will you tell Ethel that I am glad she did not come?"

The heavy lids closed over the tired eyes, and Ethel looked at the white face on the pillow with a quick fear knocking at her heart. At that moment she felt

a touch on her shoulder, and turned to see the doctor making a warning gesture of silence. She rose and followed him quietly out of the room.

"That is capital," he said, when the door of his patient's room was safely shut behind them. "Your visit will have done her great good. Your supposed fate has preyed greatly on her mind."

"Oh," Ethel cried, "has anxiety about me prevented her from getting well, do you think?"

"Oh no," was the reassuring reply; for Ethel felt that if her running away had entailed extra suffering upon Ida, even to the extent of placing her life in jeopardy, the burden of her already acute remorse would be more than she could bear. "It is doubtful if she would have understood you even yesterday. She is only now beginning to recover from the tremendous shock she received."

"Will she get quite well again—well enough to go back to the stage again, I mean?" Ethel asked.

"Impossible to say at present," he answered—a little brusquely, Ethel thought. "But, in any case, Miss Green hardly seems strong enough for the profession she had taken up. It is far too arduous a life for her."

It was not until many months afterwards, months during which Ida slowly struggled back to health and strength, that Ethel fully understood why Dr. Keane had been so emphatic in his dislike of the stage as a profession for his patient. A great part of the period occupied by her long convalescence was spent at Nutcombe Hall—an

arrangement which met with the hearty approval of the doctor, who took advantage of it to come over pretty frequently from Barnstow to see how his patient was progressing. And by the time she was well enough to think of seeking a fresh engagement, Dr. Keane had persuaded her to enter upon an engagement of another sort altogether—one with him, and not with a theatrical company.

But all that took place much later in the year; meanwhile other matters occupied Ethel's attention. There was indeed so much in one way or another to think of during the first few days following her return that even Aylewood and the letter she had found in the attic had to be relegated to the back of her mind. But when she had stayed with her uncle in town over the operation which Mrs. Nugent had to undergo, and had learnt the good news that it could not have been more successful, and that only a few weeks' nursing was needed to restore her to complete health, she suddenly startled Sir Laurence one day by announcing that she was no longer the heiress of Aylewood. Then she told him of the letter she had found, and got him to own that he had never approved of his uncle's action in leaving Aylewood away from his brother James.

"I guessed as much before I even read the letter," Ethel said. "I guessed it as soon as I knew that my grandfather was younger than my grand-uncle James. I guessed, too, that my father had made you promise not to influence me to give it up to my cousins."

"You seem to have done a lot of guessing," Sir Laurence answered with a smile. Then more gravely he added, "Yes, it is true enough, Your father did make me give him a promise to that effect, and I have kept my word, and shall continue to keep it."

"But you can't help my knowing that you think I am doing the right thing in giving it back, though," Ethel cried triumphantly.

And though Sir Laurence said nothing, the glance of pride and affection that he gave her proved to her the correctness of that guess also.

While they were staying in London they went down to Aylewood for the day. Ethel was anxious to see her cousins. She also felt that she owed a personal apology to Mrs. Jones for the abrupt and uncereemonious way in which she had thrown up her post of governess.

Mrs. Jones received her with her usual smiling good-nature. "My dear," she said, as she kissed her, and shook hands with Sir Laurence, "there is nothing to forgive. I was quite prepared for you to fly back to your uncle directly you found out, as I made sure you would before long, how mistaken you were in supposing that he was angry with you. Nina and Doris are well again now, and as lively and merry as two crickets. I must say, my dear, that I am more than pleased with the difference you have made in them. Nina has just torn a big hole in her frock by climbing over a barbed-wire fence, and when she looked a little frightened about it Doris said that she needn't mind, for grandmother wouldn't care a hang.

I declare, my dear, I was quite pleased when I overheard them, and I feel that I owe you a debt of gratitude."

Sir Laurence laughed heartily as he and Ethel drove away from the house. They could not pay a very long visit, although Mrs. Jones pressed them to stay, for they wanted to spend some time at the Red House.

"So if all trades fail, my dear Ethel," he said, "you can always pursue a distinguished career as a teacher of modern manners and slang."

"Don't laugh at me, please, Uncle Laurie," Ethel returned. "I was getting £100 a year for teaching those two children; but I am afraid few little girls have got grandmothers with such sensible ideas of education as Mrs. Jones has."

"Few indeed," assented Sir Laurence with an amused chuckle.

Margaret was away staying with her future husband's people, but Joan, Hugh, and Mrs. Dunmayne were at home.

Mrs. Dunmayne, though she welcomed them politely enough, and even expressed pleasure at seeing them, was, it soon became apparent, in one of her most exacting and querulous moods.

The finding of that long-hidden letter Ethel had left with her cousin, and which Sir Laurence now saw for the first time, had been the one theme of conversation since Ethel's last visit, and she had harped perpetually on the cruel injustice which her husband's uncle had done them in not making his will in time. She even spoke of Ethel in an aggrieved way, as if it were some-

how her fault that she had not already attained the age of twenty-one, and was consequently unable to give Aylewood back to them.

"It is cruel that we should have been kept out of our rights all this time," she said, "or rather that Hugh should have been. For myself, I don't care. I have enough to live upon. And my girls are not to be pitied either. Joan is perfectly happy as she is; and Margaret is making an excellent marriage, not only from a worldly point of view, but from every other. But my poor Hugh has been deprived of his birthright."

"I don't think he has taken the loss of the place much to heart so far," said Sir Laurence. "He is devoted to his profession, in which he has done so well. Perhaps if he had been brought up to a life of idleness and luxury, he would not be the splendid fellow he is now."

"He is a splendid fellow," his mother echoed proudly. "No, you are right, Cousin Laurence. He has never felt the injustice of his grand-uncle's will as keenly as I have felt it for him. He has even declared that his grand-uncle had a right to leave the property to whom he pleased. And," lapsing suddenly into a fretful tone, "I cannot even get him to promise that he will accept Aylewood from Ethel, if, when she comes of age, she still adheres to her determination to surrender it. But after this letter there can be no question that he has the best right to it, can there?"

"The best moral right, certainly," Sir Laurence answered slowly. "But come, we must not perplex ourselves

with doubts and fears about the future. For perhaps," he added, glancing out into the garden where Hugh and Ethel were walking up and down together, while Joan, who could never bear to be idle for long, was stooping over a flower border—"perhaps things may adjust themselves in a way which, though it is rather early yet to take into consideration, will please us all, and be a happy way out of the difficulty, and settle for ever the question as to which branch of the family has the best right to Aylewood."

But Mrs. Dunmayne shook her head despondently. She had her back to the window, and so did not follow Sir Laurence's meaning.

And yet after-events proved that the thought that flashed through Sir Laurence's mind that morning was a prophetic one. Things *were* adjusted in a way that pleased every one concerned; for when, two years and a few months later, and on the very day on which she attained her majority, Ethel kept her word and made a deed of gift of Aylewood to her cousin Hugh, he refused to accept it unless she consented to become his wife, and share the property with him. Much, he said, as he had once desired to possess Aylewood, the gift would now be valueless to him unless accompanied by the gift of herself; and Ethel, who had long since ceased to regard her cousin as in any way disagreeable, gave him the promise for which he asked.





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